

RESEARCH REPORT

Digital threats to women in politics in Nigeria

Experiences of technology-facilitated gender-based violence and political party responses



By development Research and Projects Centre

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About the development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC)



The development Research and Projects Centre is a prominent non-profit organisation formed in Nigeria in 1993 to advance development knowledge and action through civil society collaborations in which gender is cross-cutting. The dRPC is at the forefront of conducting primary research on development issues and problems that impact the lives of women and girls using participatory and qualitative research methodologies. Its research findings generate evidence for advocacy engagements and offer recommendations for policy and administrative reforms in Nigeria.

With a strong commitment to gender equality, good governance and development, dRPC has played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse on development issues in Nigeria and has worked consistently to enhance the well-being and opportunities of marginalised communities. Over its 30 years of existence, the dRPC has designed and managed development projects where it has trained, mentored and provided seed funds to hundreds of civil society organisations, most of which are women-led, and many government ministries, departments and agencies at the national and subnational levels, supporting both constituencies for effective participation in policy analysis and change.

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Key findings

- Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV) is the new frontline of political violence against women in Nigeria. Online abuse isn't random – it's strategic, intensifying during campaigns, elections and post-election tribunals. From sexualised slurs to doxxing and threats, women in politics are paying a 'safety tax' in emotional, financial and reputational capital just to stay in the game.
- Political parties are not blind to TF-GBV – they're often complicit. Party leaders know it exists but often choose silence over sanctions. Their inaction isn't ignorance, but political calculation, because protecting perpetrators, including members of their own party who deliver votes, is prioritised over protecting women who dare to lead.
- High-profile women pay a 'visibility penalty' because they bear the brunt of increased threats and abuse. And while women's lower visibility may protect them from attacks, it also takes away important opportunities to get voters, perpetuating underrepresentation.
- Gendered abuse does not impact all women equally – it's intersectional. Age, ethnicity, marital status, and political experience shape how women are targeted. Young women face sextortion and gatekeeping; mid-career women are stalked and smeared; and cultural stereotypes fuel both online and offline discrimination.
- Survivors of TF-GBV are left to fend for themselves. With no formal party mechanisms to report or redress abuse, women rely on peer mentoring, family, and sheer resilience. But suffering through abuse shouldn't be a requirement for political participation.
- TF-GBV demands a comprehensive response that shifts responsibility for its elimination from Nigerian women to political institutions, including parties. Such an approach must be backed by shifts in social norms that generate demand for change within political parties, recognising that TF-GBV reflects deep-rooted offline inequalities.

Executive summary

Overview

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV) against women is increasingly prevalent in the evolving political landscape of Nigeria, where social media has revolutionised discourse and mobilisation since the country's 2011 elections (Erikson et al., 2023; Jalo, 2025). TF-GBV refers to harmful acts committed through digital tools against individuals on the basis of their gender, and includes harassment, defamation, threats, doxxing and image-based abuse (UNFPA, 2023).

This report assesses how Nigerian political parties recognise TF-GBV and its impacts; how parties' ideology, structures and administration shape responses, and the way in which they are shaped by system drivers, narratives and social norms. Its findings draw on engagement with female politicians and party leaders in Imo, Kogi, Ondo and Rivers states to examine political parties' perceptions and responses to TF-GBV. It also suggests practical, norm-shifting options that parties can adopt to prevent TF-GBV and create a supportive environment that helps women remain and thrive in politics.

Despite Nigeria's 26 years of democratic elections, women's representation in elective positions remains below 7%, far below the 35% affirmative action target of the Beijing Declaration (1995) adopted by the country, and the 50% target in its own National Gender Policy (2021-2026) as of 2025 (IPU and UN Women, 2025). TF-GBV emerges not as an isolated digital problem but as a troubling issue that intersects with electoral cycles, age and experience in politics, as well as institutional deficiencies, imposing disproportionate burdens on women and reinforcing patriarchal norms.

Social media, penetrating approximately 16.3% of Nigeria's population as of 2025 (Kemp, 2025), amplifies not only political engagement, but also TF-GBV. Reports indicate that a significant number of female politicians face threats, encounter fake news and experience gendered hate speech, in contrast to their male counterparts (API, 2019). Many high-profile cases illustrate this relentless abuse, often orchestrated by bots, trolls and party affiliates. Popular platforms in Nigeria facilitate the abuse, such as Facebook (with most users at 38.7 million Nigerians), TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter), with surges during elections, as seen in the 2019 and 2023 elections (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Kemp, 2025; Ugwu, 2024).

This study has applied a mixed-methods approach, combining a gender analysis of political party constitutions and regulatory frameworks with data scraping of TF-GBV on X across three electoral windows (pre-, during, and post-elections) in Imo, Kogi, Ondo, and Rivers. In addition, 28 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with women politicians and officials from political parties.

The scale and patterns of TF-GBV

The study's X analysis, covering over 140,000 posts from 2022 to 2025, targeting female candidates in the four states, reveals the scale and patterns of TF-GBV. Gender stereotypes (e.g., 'ashawo', 'slut') dominated mentions, followed by attacked on the appearance and/or personality of women politicians and the questioning of their competence.

Peaks aligned with campaigns (October 2022–January 2023), elections (February–March 2023), and election petition tribunals (April–September 2023), with 2023 recording the highest count of abusive posts across a three-year time series. Peaks were also associated with the visibility of female

candidates. Pre-campaign abuse was competency-focused, shifting to stereotypes during elections and moral attacks post-election.

During primaries, perpetrators included intra-party rivals. This shifted to inter-party rivals post primaries. These attacks were amplified by retweets and pseudonymous accounts. Official party responses were minimal, with searches of political parties' X handles showing no TF-GBV-specific statements. Moderation gaps on the X platform were evident in the scraped posts: around 30% of abusive content was deleted, 25% was removed by X, and 40% was inaccessible because it appeared within private groups.

Findings from the key informant interviews illuminate the mechanisms and consequences of TF-GBV. Abuse was cyclical with defamation and smears peaking post-election, sexualised slurs increasing across phases, and threats escalating the risks. Women politicians interviewed noted that abuse, often in the form of smear campaigns, was initiated primarily on platforms like Facebook, while coordinated attacks occurred within WhatsApp groups. Although these abuses may have originated on both platforms, X is the platform that tends to be used to amplify and spread the abuse more widely. Perpetrators are often men from the same party, who view women as threats.

Demographic identities intersect, with younger women (25–44 years) facing entry barriers like sextortion; mid-career groups endure stalking; and factors like ethnicity and marital status compounding stigma (e.g., 'not married, so unfit'). The impacts cluster around reputational damage, distress and resource loss, with post-election family strains and withdrawal also being significant factors. The abuse can spill over into the offline world, including threats to families and the resulting costs for protection and security. Coping relies on resilience, legal petitions, self-censorship and evidence gathering, but support is often informal, provided through mentoring, caucus support and family.

Political complacency and calculation

Despite the prevalence of TF-GBV in Nigeria against women in politics, this study's findings reveal that Nigeria's political parties perceive TF-GBV to be a byproduct of contestation, not gendered harm, emphasising resilience over redress and ignoring intersectionality. Parties frame TF-GBV as 'rough politics,' viewing it as an inevitable aspect of political engagement rather than a targeted form of violence that affects women disproportionately and that reinforces patriarchal norms. This perception downplays its significance, treating it as non-gendered and secondary to broader political rivalries, which risks women's withdrawal from politics and, therefore, the erosion of democracy. Evidence from interviews and the X analysis demonstrates that this view overlooks the cyclical nature of abuse, its intersection with identities (e.g., age, ethnicity, marital status), and its impacts like reputational damage, emotional distress, family strains, and resource loss, leading to self-censorship and potential exit from politics.

Political parties' responses are typically informal, involving internal resolutions, rare sanctions, or external deferral, and their policies on discrimination often suffer from 'weak implementation'. Women seeking redress often face challenges, including weak enforcement and fear of backlash, which perpetuate impunity.

A gender review of the constitutions of Nigeria's 19 political parties shows that none address TF-GBV explicitly, despite commitments to women's participation. This failure normalises abuse as 'part of the job'. Official responses were minimal, as seen in the lack of TF-GBV-specific statements on party X handles. As noted, support for affected women is often informal, through mentoring or caucus networks, rather than structured administrative mechanisms.

Party elites often avoid addressing TF-GBV not out of ignorance but out of political calculation. The prevailing patriarchal norms within these parties not only normalise political violence but also establish a leadership framework that remains indifferent to the unique experiences and challenges faced by women in politics.

The political ecosystem in Nigeria is characterised by a multi-party system, dominated by the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), which together hold over 80% of the elected seats. However, frequent defections and patronage-driven politics mean that parties are largely devoid of ideology (Ogunnoiki, 2018). In this political environment, party leaders prioritise coalition maintenance over norm enforcement: the public condemnation of TF-GBV risks upsetting influential patrons and online mobilisers who provide resources and garner support, so parties default to silence or the informal handling of this issue.

Women in political party structures are mostly confined to mobilising roles within women's wings rather than leadership positions (Quadri, 2015). As a result, a push for party representation is not perceived or backed by some parties as the norm. The 2023 elections saw a record 1,553 female candidates, yet only 78 were elected – a reflection of structural barriers, including high participation costs, cultural biases and the culture of TF-GBV (Shibayan, 2023). Again, narratives around 'rough politics' and resilience reinforced patriarchal social norms.

Gaps in legal frameworks

Nigeria's legal frameworks reveal significant gaps in addressing TF-GBV, resulting in inadequate attention to this issue within the legal system. Findings from the gender analysis of electoral governance mechanisms reveal that they also fall short. The Gender Policy of the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) (2021–2025) integrates gender into its operations but omits TF-GBV, focusing solely on female voter support without addressing the protection of women in politics against TF-GBV or imposing penalties on parties for non-compliance. Its Electoral Offences document addresses only physical threats, and the Electoral Risk Management Tool ignores digital risks. The Inter-Party Advisory Council's 2021 Code of Conduct promotes equal participation and prohibits inflammatory language, but it lacks enforcement for political parties, as was evident in the unchecked TF-GBV during the 2023 general elections. While Nigeria's legal frameworks aim to contribute to broader gender inclusion and electoral integrity, beyond TF-GBV, even GBV is also not addressed explicitly across all documents or criminalised in political contexts.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study concludes that TF-GBV is a systemic tool that reinforces patriarchal norms, with gaps in laws, party constitutions and governance that risk silencing women and keeping their representation low. It aligns with global trends but is exacerbated by Nigeria's digital ecosystem and patronage politics.

The recommendations from this study prioritise preventive reforms rather than response.

Political parties that want to live up to their commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment can embed TF-GBV clauses into their constitutions, codes of conduct, or ethics to shift norms and create supportive environments. This includes establishing formal mechanisms for reporting, investigating and imposing sanctions against perpetrators, as well as training on gender sensitivity and digital safety. Parties with the political will to enact meaningful change should prioritise women's leadership roles beyond mobilising women's wings, enforce anti-discrimination policies with rigour, and collaborate with electoral bodies to monitor and hold them accountable.

By addressing intersectional inequalities and providing resources for evidence gathering and legal support, parties can help to reduce impunity and foster resilience, helping women to stay and thrive in politics.

To develop a long-term strategy to address TF-GBV in Nigeria, the country must amend existing legal frameworks to adequately recognise and address TF-GBV while strengthening safeguards on social media platforms. A pivotal first step in this process is for INEC to incorporate insights from this study into the upcoming review of its Gender Policy, which is set to expire in 2025, given that the study's findings demonstrate a significant lack of political will within parties. This study also recommends the adoption of the 2022 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa. INEC and the Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC) should mandate monitoring and reporting and integrate TF-GBV into policies and codes of conduct.

Other recommendations focus on the long-term change enablers that can shift social norms and create incentives for political parties to act. For example, development partners in Nigeria with robust GBV prevention and response portfolios should expand their focus to include TF-GBV. Given the emerging nature of TF-GBV in Nigeria, their country portfolios should be expanded to include support for formative research on the experiences of women in appointive and elected positions. Development partners such as the United Nations University Operating Unit on Policy-Driven Electronic Governance (UNU-EGOV), which hosted the 2025 International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance in November 2025 in Abuja, Nigeria, were expected to incorporate and explore issues of TF-GBV during the event.

Political parties should actively work to revising their codes of conduct and legal frameworks to protect women from TF-GBV. With these changes, social media companies can be compelled to enhance their algorithms for detecting gendered abuse and implement better features for flagging election-related misconduct. Collaboration with Nigerian regulators is also essential for effective content moderation and the fight against misinformation. Furthermore, donors and civil society should support initiatives that promote cultural and normative changes around these issues in Nigeria.

Key terms

Cyberbullying: Cyberbullying involves repeated online insults, threats or degrading comments intended to cause harm. Women in politics face disproportionate gendered abuse that discourages their participation.

Cyberstalking: Cyberstalking is the use of technology to track, monitor or harass someone online. It aims to instil fear, restrict freedom and control behaviour.

Doxxing: Doxxing refers to the deliberate release of private information, such as addresses or phone numbers, with the intention of intimidating or endangering someone.

Election moments: These are notable points in time during an election cycle that have an impact on the outcome, public perception, or the overall process. They include candidacy announcements, pre-election campaigns, election day events, declaration of results, tribunal periods and tribunal judgement dates.

Gendered resilience: This refers to the expectation that women should endure gender-based abuse without complaint.

Online and offline spillover: This occurs when online harassment escalates into real-world harm.

Peer mentoring: Peer mentoring is guidance and support provided by people with similar experiences.

Psychological distress: This refers to emotional suffering linked to sustained abuse. It may manifest as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress.

Sextortion: Sextortion is blackmail using intimate images or information to coerce survivors. Offenders demand further content, money or silence under threat of exposure.

Stereotypes and norms: Stereotypes are oversimplified beliefs about individuals or groups (e.g., 'women are too emotional for politics'). Social norms, in contrast, are shared expectations about how women and men should behave in society. In this study, stereotypes are treated as expressions of underlying gender norms that regulate women's political participation.

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV): TF-GBV refers to harmful acts committed through digital tools against individuals based on gender. It includes harassment, defamation, threats, doxxing and image-based abuse (UNFPA, 2023).

Acronyms

AC	Action Congress
ADC	African Democratic Congress
ADP	Action Democratic Party
APC	All Progressives Congress
APP	All People's Party
BP	Boot Party
CSOs	Civil society organisations
dRPC	development Research and Projects Centre
GBV	Gender-based violence
IGP	INEC Gender Policy
INEC	Independent National Electoral Commission
IPAC	Inter-Party Advisory Council
KII	Key informant interview
NGOs	Non-governmental organisations
PDP	Peoples Democratic Party
PPL	Political party leaders
SGBV	Sexual and gender-based violence
SOP	Standard operating procedure
TF-GBV	Technology-facilitated gender-based violence
UNCSW	United Nations Commission on the State of Women
VAPP	Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act
WIP	Women in Politics
YP	Young Progressives Party
ZLP	Zenith Labour Party

1 Introduction

‘Sometimes you don’t even want to put on your phone, because the messages are so demeaning; it makes you question if the struggle is worth it’

KII, Female politician, Rivers State

Political parties in Nigeria have a problem. For leading scholars and Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the problem is one of an absence of ideological differentiations amongst political parties (Ogunnoiki, 2018; Omolaoye, 2025). For others who view Nigerian political parties through gender lenses, the problem is beyond ideology; it is fundamentally a problem of gender blindness and the wholesale disregard for the challenges and barriers faced by women politicians in the political party system (Omotoso and Ekweremadu, 2022). The gender problem of Nigeria’s political party system has propelled the country’s women politicians into the global spotlight, as seen in the case of Nigerian Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan’s claim of sexual harassment, which was tabled and discussed at the United Nations 69th Commission on the Status of Women in 2025 (Ugwu, 2025).

As digital technology and social media become more accessible, the challenges faced by women in politics have become more troubling with the rise in technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TF-GBV) worsening traditional gender inequalities (Ogunsakin and Ogunsakin, 2023). TF-GBV refers to harmful acts committed through digital tools against individuals based on gender; it includes harassment, defamation, threats, doxxing and image-based abuse (UNFPA, 2023).

The GBV experiences of women in Nigeria are being shaped by their country’s leap into a new digital age in recent years. With 38.7 million social media users in Nigeria as of 2025, platforms such as X, Facebook and WhatsApp have transformed the country’s political discourse since the 2011 elections, but they have also become battlegrounds for gendered violence (Ekdale and Tully, 2018; Kemp, 2025). TF-GBV is manifested through online harassment, cyberbullying, doxxing, spreading false information, and making online threats (Cheeseman et al., 2020). According to a report from the Public Media Alliance (2023), as the 2023 general elections approached, there was a surge in false information and content designed to create division on social media. This had a disproportionate impact on female politicians, as was observed during the 2019 and 2023 general elections (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Ugwu, 2024).

With Nigeria marking 26 years of holding democratic elections at the national level in 2025, its achievement is somewhat diminished by the under-representation of women in politics. The Director-General of the National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies (an organ of the National Assembly created by an Act of Parliament to provide legislative support services and promote democratic principles for good governance) has this to say:

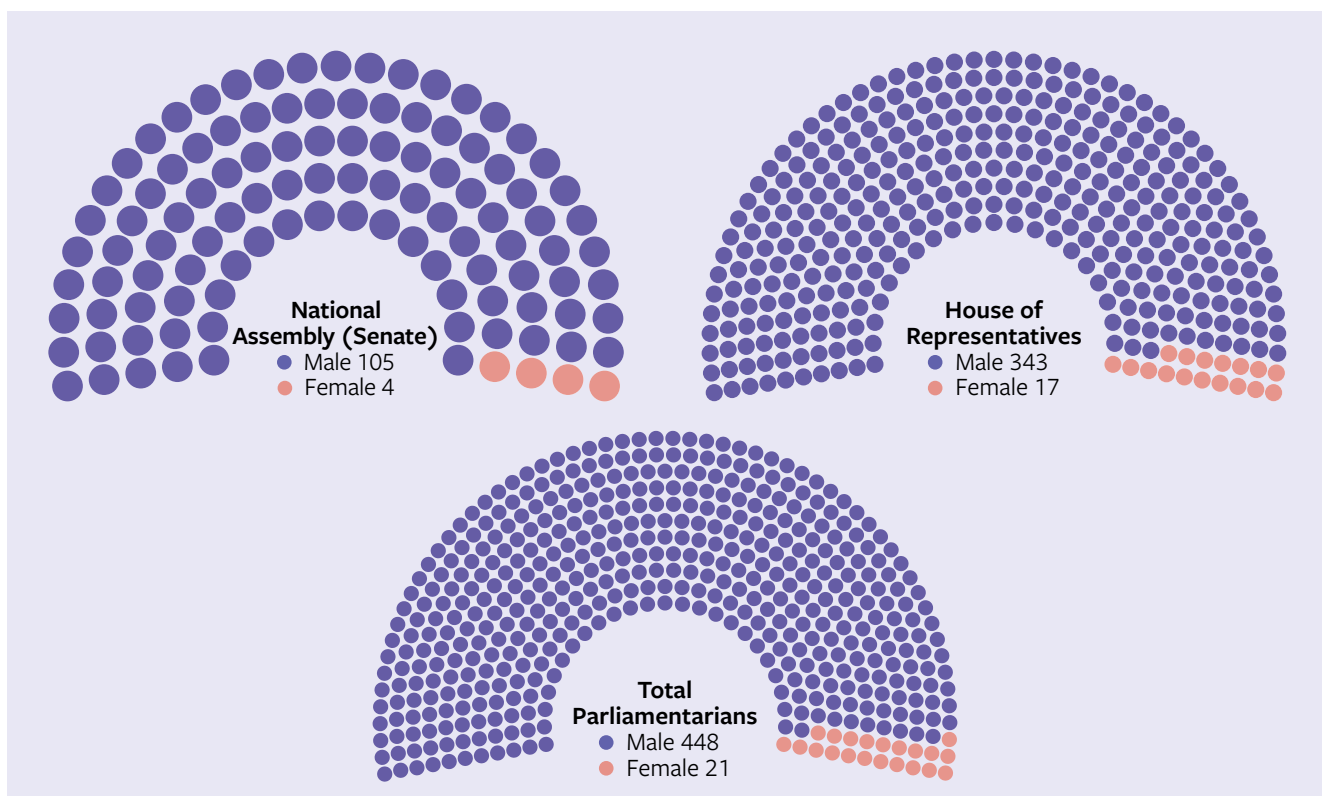
‘Less than 7% of women have held elective and appointive positions in Nigeria since 1999, despite the recommended 35% affirmative action for women’s participation.’

Premium Times (2024)

Given that social media has become increasingly essential for political discussions and wields a growing influence over voter opinions, this report examines the extent to which Nigerian political parties recognise and respond to TF-GBV. It highlights what political parties can do to shift internal and external unequal gender norms and create supportive structures to sanction and enable women to remain engaged and thrive in politics in the country’s politics.

Nigeria has Africa's lowest percentage of women's representation in its National Assembly. In its 10th Assembly (2023–2027), women occupy 4 of 109 Senate seats (3.7%) and 17 of 360 House seats (4.7%) – a total female representation of just 4.5%. This is similar to the 9th Assembly (2019–2023), when women held 8 of 109 Senate seats (7.3%) and 13 of 360 House seats (3.6%), for a total of 4.5% of all seats. This places Nigeria at the bottom of the continent's rankings for the share of women in parliament, far behind South Africa (44.8%) and Rwanda (63.8%), which have the highest numbers (Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women, 2025). To date, Nigerian parties have resisted legislative attempts to institutionalise any quota systems that would address the underrepresentation of women in the National Assembly.

Figure 1 Women's representation in Nigeria's parliament, 2023–2027



Nigeria's political ecosystem, which is dominated by the big two parties, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), lacks the gender consciousness and institutionalised safeguards required to tackle TF-GBV (Cheeseman, 2016; Ogunnoiki, 2018). This gap in mindsets and systems leads to a blind spot on online abuse, setting the stage for unchecked digital harms against women in politics.

It is important to explain this gender blindness within the political party system in terms of the masculinity that is embedded in Nigeria's current democratic institutions, shaped by a military-drafted constitution that ushered in the country's return to civilian rule in 1999 after 28 years of military dictatorship. In 2025, despite 26 years of democratic elections since the 1999 return to elections and democracy, the persistence of structures shaped by force, patriarchal norms, and brinkmanship means that gender considerations and ideas of gender equality in politics are viewed as anathema and often rejected.

The fact that political parties hold on to such positions in a digital age where digital warriors¹ wage war against women without recognising the potential threat to democracy is concerning and can only

¹ The term 'digital warriors' is used metaphorically to describe those who engage in cyber aggression – a form of harmful or offensive digital behaviour such as online harassment, bullying or stalking (Ramos et al., 2023).

be explained by the persistence of patriarchal gender norms and expectations (Emerson-Keeler et al., 2023).

Analysts studying the everyday experiences of Nigerian women engaging in politics argue that this issue is rooted in oppressive legal, social and administrative structures underpinned by patriarchal gender norms. The impact can be seen in the stories of Jennifer Bina Ifedi, who was attacked as she waited to cast her vote, as described at a UN Women Africa meeting in 2023, and of serving female politicians, such as Senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (Ogundapo, 2025; UN Women Africa, 2023). In doing so, these analysts focus squarely on physical, sexual and psychological violence in research into the GBV experienced by female politicians in Nigeria.

Few studies, however, focus on TF-GBV, and even fewer zoom in on political parties when trying to explain the GBV experiences of women in politics. There are exceptions, with Uduh (2019) documenting coordinated cyber-bullying of female candidates by party supporters during elections, and Okoroafor (2025) showing how party elites and allied troll networks deliberately weaponise digital media through sexualised slander, doctored images and religious incitement. Yet the broader literature reveals significant gaps where studies – such as Oladipo and Chukwudi (2023) on the limited benefits of social media for women’s political visibility, Ogbuagu et al. (2017) on women’s reluctance to use social media for political engagement, and Ogunmusire (2021) on biased online responses to female politicians – focus primarily on the women and how they experience the impacts of online abuse.

This notable lack of focus on the responses of political parties to TF-GBV is a gap that must be addressed. Focusing on political parties in Nigeria’s democratic electoral system is essential because parties are the gatekeepers of power: they recruit candidates, control nomination lists, allocate campaign resources, and mobilise supporters – precisely the arenas where gendered harassment and violence can be enabled or constrained. Comparative research indicates that parties’ internal rules and incentives have a significant influence on women’s access to candidacy, and exposure to hostile campaign environments, underscores their pivotal gatekeeping role in representation and political competition (Kunovich and Paxton, 2005).

In Nigeria, election-observation and gender-security analyses document how women candidates face intimidation and abuse during pre-election and campaign periods – often from party supporters and allied networks – highlighting that a party’s tolerance or sanctioning of these practices can normalise or deter such behaviour (Safir and Alam, 2015). Global evidence on violence against women in politics also shows how party cultures, disciplinary codes and complaint mechanisms influence whether women remain in races or withdraw under pressure, underscoring the responsibility of parties to prevent and respond to abuse (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

The rest of this report is organised as follows: Section 2 outlines the research objective, questions and methodology. Section 3 presents the key findings from the analysis of scraped data from X, key informant interviews and gender analysis of political parties’ constitutions to identify perpetrators, targets, impacts, party responses, and regulatory gaps. Section 4 concludes with overarching insights and recommendations for political parties, regulatory agencies, platforms, and development partners.

This report is part of a transnational collaboration with the Data Pop Alliance (DPA) team in Brazil, enabling cross-country learning on how TF-GBV manifests and how political institutions can respond in diverse democratic contexts (DPA, 2025).

2 Research objective and methodology

Analysis of national policies, legal frameworks and political party constitutions regarding the impact of TF-GBV in the Nigerian political domain points to gaps in awareness and responsiveness. These gaps are rooted in negative gender norms and are manifested as gender blindness or performative neutrality within the policy and political landscape. Given the dearth of research on this phenomenon, this study applies an exploratory formative research methodology to gain insights and investigate how Nigerian women in politics and the leadership of political parties perceive and respond to TF-GBV. By doing so, the research objective of this study is to expand the stock of knowledge and deepen understanding of the complex gender norms that drive TF-GBV, highlighting the strategic responses of women politicians as they negotiate it, respond to it, or declare defeat.

The four research questions that have guided this study are as follows:

1. How do political parties view TF-GBV, its significance, and its impact on female members?
2. How do political parties, in their ideological, structural and administrative diversity, respond to TF-GBV against women in politics?
3. What factors shape their responses, including political systems, narratives and social norms?
4. What can political parties do to change norms within their structures to create more supportive structures for women experiencing TF-GBV to stay and thrive in politics?

This study adopts a formative research approach, defined in recent literature as a pre-implementation and early-stage inquiry using mixed methods to assess context, feasibility, acceptability, and delivery constraints, with findings iteratively informing analysis or intervention design (Mukherjee et al., 2024). It combines analytical document review, social media data scraping and analysis, and key informant interviews (KIs) to dynamically explore research questions. This approach enables triangulation, where insights from document and data analysis are cross-validated with qualitative evidence. This is done through a three-step research process, as follows:

Step one: Gender analysis of political parties' constitutions and guiding documents of party regulatory bodies.

Step two: Social media analysis focusing on specific political moments. This second step measures the levels and type of abuse against women in politics and assesses the extent to which political parties acknowledge and/or take action against TF-GBV through their platforms and party machinery.

Step three: Qualitative data collection through KIs targets two discrete demographics of respondents:

- a. women in politics, to establish and understand their experiences of TF-GBV, forms, and impact on their willingness to remain engaged and participate in politics; and
- b. political party leaders, to examine their perceptions of TF-GBV, the role of political parties in responding to it, and establish the nature and extent of responses, as well as recognition of the harmful patriarchal norms that underpin TF-GBV.

The research focuses on four states in four corresponding geopolitical zones of Nigeria, namely Imo State in the south-east, Kogi State in the north-central, Ondo State in the south-west and Rivers State in the south-south, as shown in Figure 2. In Nigeria's diverse political landscape, these states account for regional and ethnic variations across major geopolitical zones. These states were also selected because their election cycle fell outside the constitutionally determined schedule, with their off-cycle elections all falling within the study period from 1 November 2023 to 18 January 2025.

Figure 2 Area of study

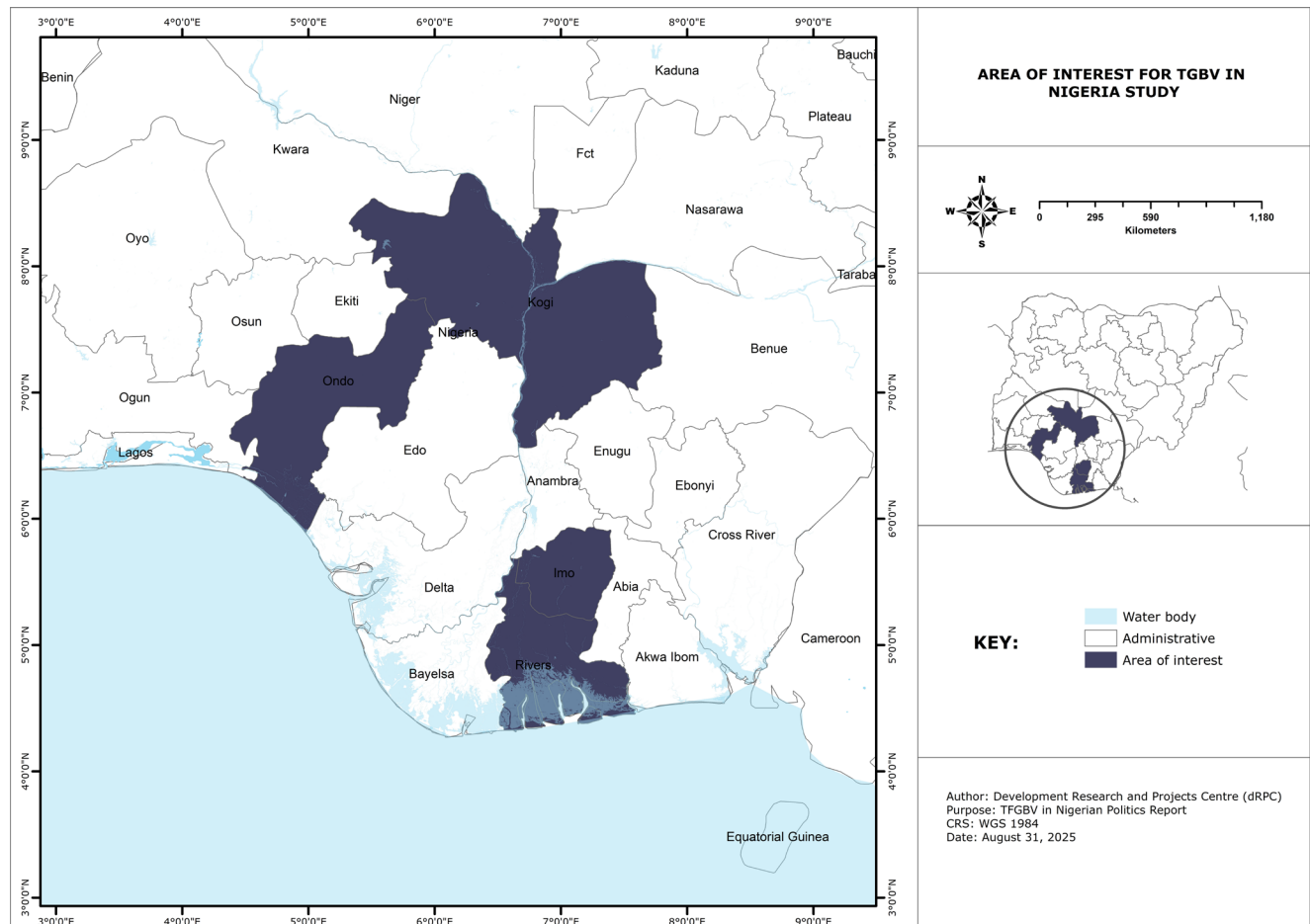
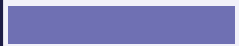
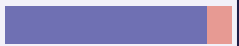
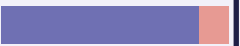
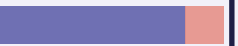
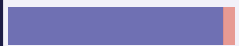
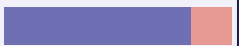
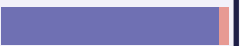
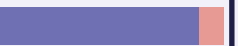
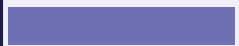
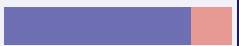
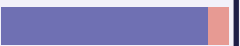
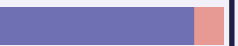


Table 1 highlights the Independent National Electoral Commission's electoral roster, which featured 244 female candidates representing 10 political parties, compared to 1,690 male candidates in the gubernatorial, national and state assembly elections across all four states (INEC, 2023).

Table 1 Female candidates across various elections

State	Governorship		Deputy Governorship		National Assembly		State House of Assembly		Party filling female Gov/ Dep-Gov candidates
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Imo	 18 (100%)	0	 16 (89%)	2 (11%)	 147 (87%)	21 (13%)	 316 (83%)	66 (17%)	ADP, APC,
Kogi	 21 (95%)	1 (5%)	 18 (82%)	4 (11%)	 108 (96%)	4 (4%)	 204 (89%)	26 (11%)	APP, BP, PDP, ZLP-Gov
Ondo	 17 (100%)	0	 14 (82%)	3 (18%)	 79 (91%)	8 (4%)	 181 (87%)	26 (13%)	ADP, SDP, SDP
Rivers	 32 (97%)	1 (3%)	 27 (82%)	6 (18%)	 142 (86%)	23 (14%)	 350 (86%)	55 (14%)	AC, ADC, LP, PDP, SDP, YPP, ZLP
Total	 88 (98%)	2 (2%)	 75 (85%)	13 (15%)	 476 (89%)	56 (11%)	 1051 (86%)	173 (14%)	

Source: INEC (2023 and 2024)

Step 1: Gender analysis of political parties' constitutions and policy-guiding frameworks of political party regulatory bodies

This step entailed a document review and gender analysis of participating political parties' constitutions to assess whether parties address TF-GBV in their official documents, whether they have specific procedures to equip female candidates to respond to TF-GBV, and the extent to which there are dedicated financial and human resources for such purposes. The gender analysis also examined the extent to which participating political parties' documents and procedures provide for processes to mitigate the impacts of TF-GBV on women in politics.

Step 2: Social media analysis (X platform scraping)

This step entailed data mobilisation and an in-depth analysis of narratives in social media discourses during specific electoral moments. The social media analysis assessed the prevalence, forms and impacts of TF-GBV against women in politics, identified targeted individuals and their intersectional identities, mapped discourses in the English language and Pidgin English, and observed political party responses. The analysis addressed the following sub-questions:

1. what types of TF-GBV were used against women in politics before, during, and after specific election moments?
2. who (which women) were targets of this TF-GBV? What were their racial, ethnic, sexual and religious identities?

3. which political parties did they belong to?
4. what discourses (words, concepts, and underpinning gender norms) were used as part of the TF-GBV in English and Pidgin English?
5. what, if anything, did political parties and individual politicians say and do in response to this violence? What role did they play in the discourse? Did they defend women politicians? Did they perpetrate or serve as an echo chamber for the violence? Was there no response?

Social media data sources and scope: The social media platform of choice, X, was selected because of its dominant role in Nigerian political discourse and the relative ease of ethically scraping public data from the site via an X API² subscription. The research focuses on major political moments between 1 September, 2022, and July 2025, covering the 2023 general elections, two off-cycle gubernatorial elections on 11 November, 2023 (Imo State and Kogi State) across different geopolitical zones, and two local government elections in distinct regions: 5 October, 2024 (Rivers State) and 18 January, 2025 (Ondo State). The rest of the elections took place on 25 February, 2023, for the Presidential and National Assembly contests, followed by the governorship and State House of Assembly elections on 11 March, 2023.

For each selected election, all relevant posts, comments, replies and threads on X were scraped in line with ethical protocols. Scraping excluded private accounts and ensured the anonymisation of non-public figures. Data was collected across three distinct periods for each election: six months before the election, during the election week, and six months afterwards. This temporal framing allowed for a comparative analysis of online discourse across different electoral cycles and provided insights into how TF-GBV evolves around heightened political activity.

Social media data collection methods: The data scraping utilised automated scraping tools (e.g., via APIs via Tweepy, Python/JavaScript scripts compliant with X's terms) to gather posts containing keywords related to TF-GBV (e.g., slurs, threats and misinformation targeting women). For party responses, the study mined comments from official X accounts of political parties and leaders. The focus was on parties that were active in the selected election locations or those with representation in state legislatures from the last election cycle. The languages covered were English and Pidgin English. While these languages dominate political conversations on X, it is important to note that TF-GBV is also expressed in the 520 indigenous languages that the platform scraping tool struggles to detect. As such, this analysis captures only part of the linguistic landscape of online abuse. In total, 140,096 posts were scraped from X during the study period. Of these, 55,082 posts were categorised as abusive and subjected to further analysis.

Analytical framework for categorising TF-GBV

The categorisation of TF-GBV applied in this research was developed in collaboration with the Data-Pop Alliance (DPA) Brazil and adapted to the Nigerian political context to ensure both cultural and linguistic relevance. The framework grouped online abuse into seven broad categories, enabling systematic coding and comparison of patterns of TF-GBV across different electoral cycles, candidates and contexts.

1. **Identity-based attacks:** Ethnicity, nationality, social class, disability or age. Attacks based on who they are or where they come from (e.g., cultural prejudice, ageist, or ableist remarks) and attacks against religion.
2. **(Purely) gender-stereotype based attacks:** Any sexist clichés, e.g., 'talks too much', 'not feminine enough', 'bad mother', 'neglects family for politics'; or criticism of parents, extended

family, spouse/children or other personal relationships; and attacks against sex-related practices (e.g. slut shaming, being unmarried, 'slept her way to the top/ to get the position', etc.).

3. **Attacks against appearance and personality:** Criticism of looks, body, clothing ('unattractive', 'too pretty', 'dresses too expensively', 'too feminine'), or how they speak/act (e.g., 'too emotional', 'too aggressive', 'hysterical', 'overly emotional').
4. **Attacks against moral judgement:** morality-based attacks, e.g., 'untrustworthy', 'corrupt'; attacks that question their moral fitness for office, e.g., 'is she a good person? corrupt/ crooked'.
5. **Attacks against competence and capacity to govern:** Combines attacks on intelligence, skills, past experience, and perceived ability to lead (attacks against their intelligence and skills), e.g., 'puppet', 'stupid', etc.; prior career or qualifications, e.g. 'unqualified for politics'.
6. **Attacks against policies, political and ideological alignment:** Combines attacks on political party, ideology or supported policies. Criticism based on party affiliation, stance on feminism, anti-racism, specific policies or initiatives they support, such as abortion or other political ideologies.

Step 3: Qualitative key informant interviews (KIs) with women politicians and leaders of political parties

This study conducted 28 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIs) targeting two sets of respondents: political party representatives and women in politics. Table 2 below shows the coverage of 16 political party representatives (with eight men and eight women, four per state across major parties holding formal positions in party leadership or strategic roles). Table 2 also shows that a total of 12 women in politics (3 per state) were interviewed from the 4 selected states to document their experiences of TF-GBV. They included women who were candidates or holding offices and women who had left politics. The KI tools were pretested and validated.

Table 2 KI sample size

States	Women in politics	Political party leaders		Total
		Male	Female	
Imo	3	2	2	7
Kogi	3	2	2	7
Ondo	3	2	2	7
Rivers	3	2	2	7
Total	12	8	8	28

Ethical considerations

The study's qualitative tools and research design, including sample selection was approved by the Ethical Review Board of Bayero University, a national university located in Kano State, and the ODI Global Research Ethics Committee. To protect confidentiality, respondents were anonymised and referred to only by gender and geography. Consistent with standard ethical protocols, an informed consent process was administered prior to interviews to obtain consent from all participants. Social media scraping was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the X platform (Barnes and Hames, 2023; X Corp, 2024).

Limitations of this study

One key limitation of the study is its geographic and linguistic narrowness for the X scraping: discourses in Nigerian languages other than English and Pidgin English were not scraped. Documenting TF-GBV that occurred outside election periods, and from different platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, was outside the scope of this study. The constraints of the X platforms' API must also be acknowledged. For example, constraints of rate limits, incomplete thread capture, and difficulty with keyword detection, such as sarcastic abuse. Tweets that were not geotagged offered limited location precision, and non-English/Pidgin English slang or emojis posed difficulties in the capture process. In addition, the recent social media moderation by the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) under Nigeria's Code of Practice in 2024 resulted in the removal of over 58 million posts and the deactivation of more than 13 million accounts across platforms, including X (Elebeke and Umeh, 2025).

Limitations with the qualitative investigation related to the narrow selection of 4 out of Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, with a sample size of 28 political party representatives and women in politics. While the depth of the investigation in line with formative research approaches may well provide strong assurances of representativeness, extrapolation and generalisation of results to the gender norms landscape of the entire country may be somewhat circumscribed.



Women wearing purple and white outfits at a protest rally in response to the government's rejection of a gender equality bill. Lagos, Nigeria, March 2022. © Tolu Owwoye | Shutterstock ID: 2150255357.

3 Key findings

Findings drawn from the three lines of inquiry point to the fact that TF-GBV is a salient, real and formidable barrier to the entry and advancement of Nigerian women in politics. Despite its salience in the political lives of women politicians, the male-dominated political party structures and regulatory bodies remain blind and unresponsive to TF-GBV, resulting in gaps and inaction in policy, procedure and law.

The entrenched gender norms that surround gender roles contribute significantly to the persistence of TF-GBV, as they perpetuate stereotypes that deem women less capable in politics. These norms foster an environment where violence against women is normalised, leading political parties to overlook or downplay the issue. As a result, the lack of accountability and responsiveness from these male-dominated structures not only silences women but also impedes their progress toward equitable representation and support in politics.

3.1 Digital warriors and their arsenal against women politicians

Findings from this study reveal that TF-GBV in Nigerian politics is prevalent and has cyclical connections to periods immediately before, during and immediately after elections. As campaigns heat up, so does the online harm. Abuse peaks not randomly, but strategically, and is focused on electoral cycles as de facto political moments.

Online violence and threats of physical violence are also designed to have offline repercussions that erode women's credibility and their careers in politics. Recent studies focusing on Nigeria align with this study's findings, noting a rise in TF-GBV particularly during electoral periods, where online harassment discourages women's participation (Eze and Okonkwo, 2024; Ugwu, 2024).

Both social media analysis (X) mapping and KIs lines of inquiry with women in politics tell a converging story of TF-GBV as pervasive, with gender stereotypes dominating online language and with surges that are timed to coincide with elections. This study draws from the three methodological approaches to illustrate how TF-GBV operates as a tool of patriarchal control, amplified by Nigeria's digital ecosystem.

From 140,096 X posts analysed (observing timeframes 2022–2025), gender stereotypes (e.g., 'ashawo', 'slut') and appearance/personality attacks (e.g., 'too emotional', 'unattractive') were the most common, followed by competency questioning (e.g., 'puppet', 'unqualified'). Corruption accusations were often gendered (78.91% of post mentions co-occurred with terms like 'she' or 'woman'). Findings from the KIs with women in politics corroborate this, with 80% (16 of 20) of the total female respondents having experienced online violence, compared to 25% (2 of 8) of the total male respondents.

These abuse categories reflect deeper societal norms, where women are reduced to their physical features or morality rather than their political acumen. For example, terms like 'ashawo' (prostitute) are rooted in colonial-era slang but weaponised in modern digital spaces to slut-shame female candidates, as seen in cases during the 2019 elections (Ubelejit-Nte et al., 2019). This prevalence is not isolated; a 2023 Public Media Alliance report noted surges in false information targeting women politicians, which align with the study's findings. Table 3 highlights these categories and the most commonly used abuse terms from the analysis of the X platform.

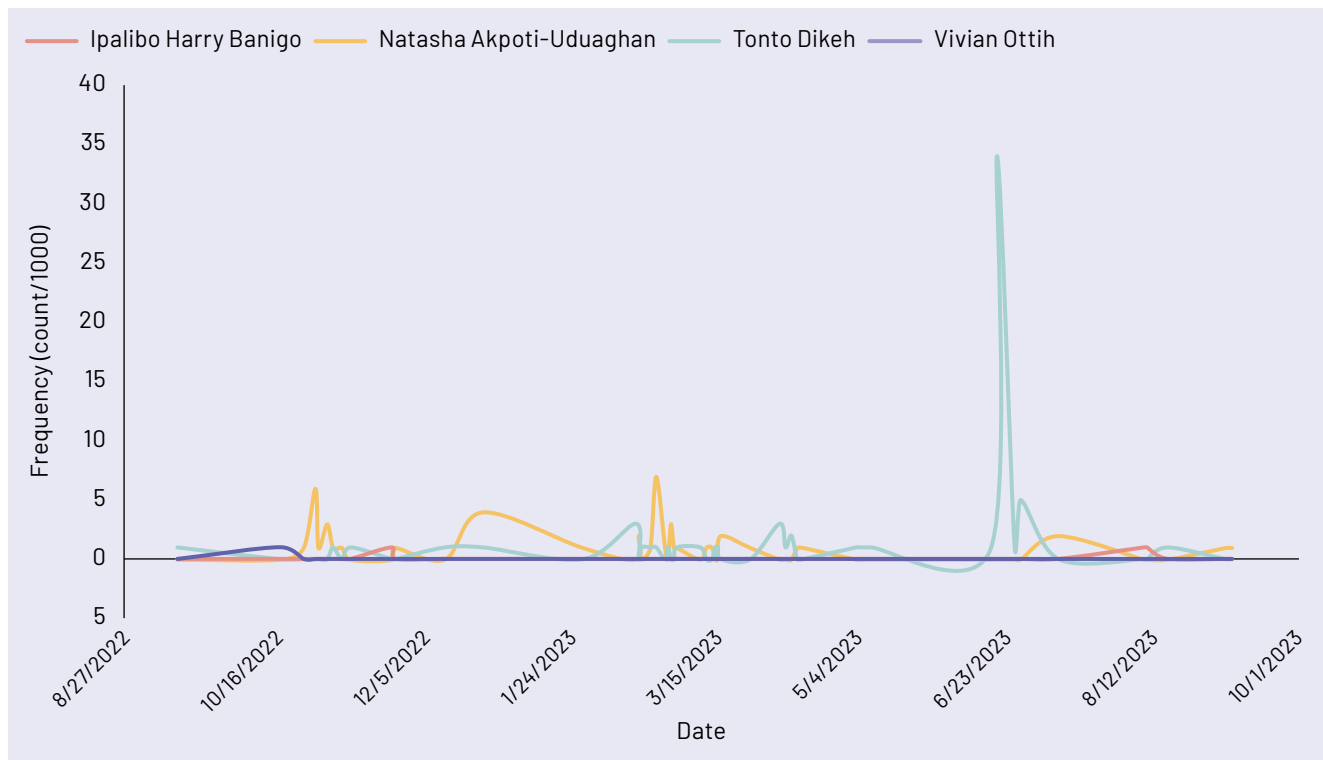
Table 3 Categories of abuse and the abusive terms used most frequently

Category	Mentions	Abusive terms
Gender stereotypes	4107	ashawo, side chick, slut, prostitute, iron lady
Appearance/personality	3987	fat, thin, old, cow, fish
Competence/capacity	3137	stupid, puppet, idiot, weak, unfit
Identity-based	996	witch, jazz (Pidgin English for magical powers)
Moral judgement	815	shameless, nonsense, hag
Policy/ideological	83	feminist, shut up
Unspecified (abuse fits none of the categories)	5583	'You'll regret this' or 'Watch your back'

Online abuse against these women reveals persistent gender biases, as noted by UN Women (2024). For example, cultural expectations rooted in patriarchal norms often accuse women in politics of neglecting their families for their ambitions (Dutse, 2025). As Table 3 shows, the most common area of attack – gender stereotypes – appeared in 4,107 posts linking political ambition to promiscuity and questioning women's respectability. Appearance and personality-based attacks (3,987 posts) reduce women's value to physical traits, undermining their authority. Competence-related abuse (3,137 posts) suggests that leadership is inherently masculine, trivialising women's intellect. Identity-based abuse (996 posts) intersects with race, religion and marital status, intensifying the harm for minority women. Moral judgement (815 posts) targets those defying traditional roles, while even policy views are attacked – 83 posts labelled feminist voices deviant. The largest category, unspecified digital threats (5,583 posts), includes intimidation and harassment that aims to silence women. These patterns align with global trends in TF-GBV, which reflects offline inequalities (UN Women, 2024a).

Cyclical patterns of abuse are driven by the changing visibility of women politicians. Trends over time, depicted in Figure 3 for four of Nigeria's women politicians, show spikes during the pre-campaign period (October 2022–January 2023), the elections (February–March 2023), and the tribunals (April–September 2023), with 2023 recording the highest number of abusive posts when time series data were observed from 2022 to 2025. For example, the case of senator Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan, whose run for office in Kogi state between 2022 and 2023 was marred by campaign violence and vote rigging, shows how public attention during the post-election tribunals can lead to spikes in abuse, as shown in Figure 3 in June 2023. This cyclical nature suggests strategic deployment, where abuse intensifies whenever women's visibility peaks. Pre-campaign rhetoric, for example, focuses on deterring entry, while shaming is amplified during election periods to sway voters. Post-election, moral attacks aim to discredit victories or force withdrawals.

Figure 3 Trends of abuse spikes around key political moments



X findings reveal where TF-GBV manifests in coordinated attacks that surge with electoral timelines. This pattern suggests TF-GBV is strategically timed to disrupt women's momentum, amplifying during high-stakes periods when public scrutiny intensifies.

The categories of abuse are not static. Findings from the four states revealed that pre-campaign abuse focused on competency; abuse during elections emphasised stereotypes and shaming; and post-election abuse targeted morality. This adaptation reflects perpetrators' tactics to maximise the damage at each stage. Figure 4 shows how competency attacks (e.g., 'unqualified') dominate early phases to gatekeep, while stereotypes (e.g., 'bad mother') surge during voting to exploit patriarchal norms. This evolution shows TF-GBV adapting as a tool of deliberate harm to women in politics.

Figure 4 Abuse categories around key political moments

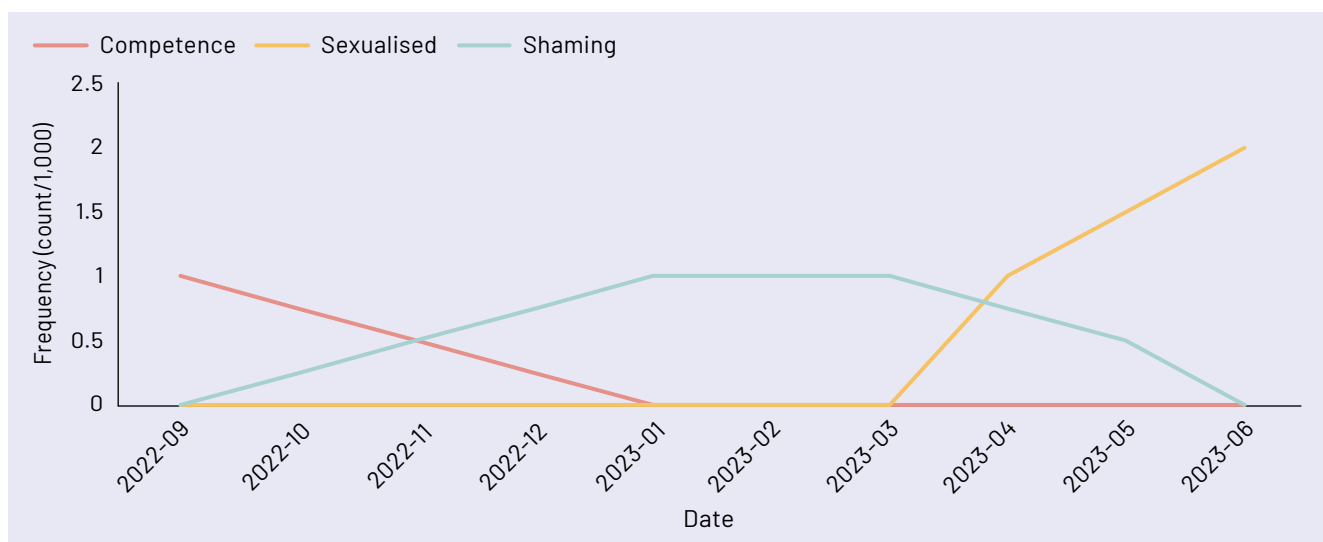
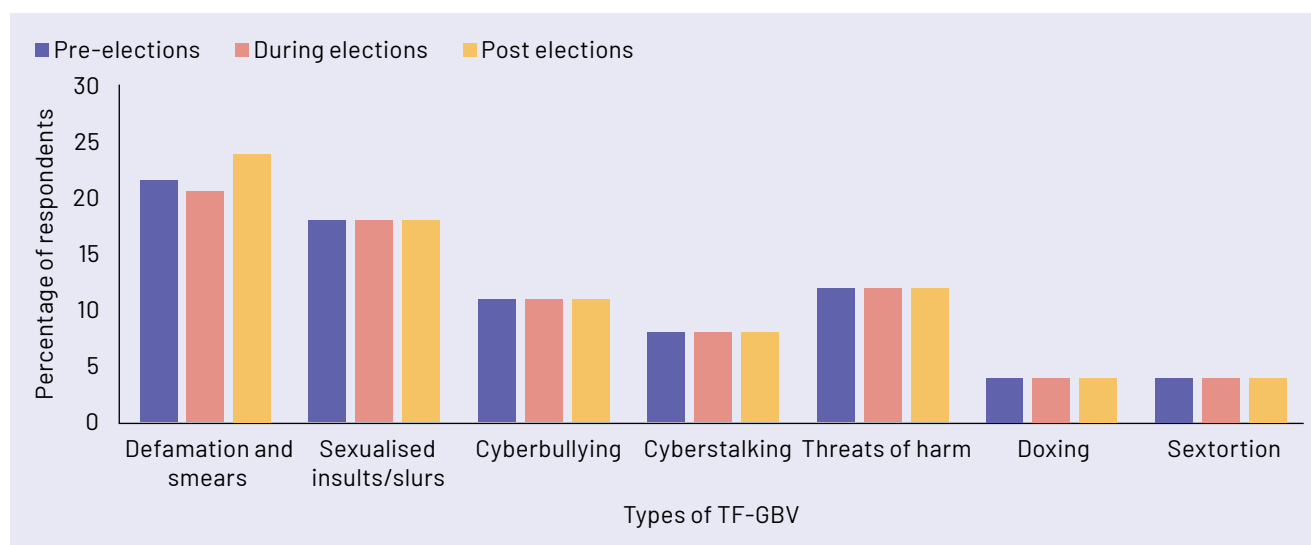


Figure 5 Types of TF-GBV through key political moments



Findings from respondents (women in politics), as highlighted in Figure 5, indicate that defamation peaks post-election, while other types show consistency across political moments. Their form and intensity vary significantly across the diverse political and cultural contexts of the four states. Kogi, for example, emerges consistently as a TF-GBV hotspot, which respondents linked to its highly competitive and volatile political culture, where both online and offline intimidation are normalised. In contrast, Imo and Ondo show relatively lower levels of sexualised language, which may be tied to Igbo and Yoruba cultural conservatism that discourages the overt use of slurs but instead enables more coded or reputation-based smears (Nkama et al., 2022; Muraina and Ajimatanraeję, 2022). Rivers exhibits hybrid patterns, in which political rivalry drives aggressive campaign rhetoric, often amplified by youth mobilisers online (Onuchuku et al., 2023).

Online violence is amplified by platforms. Female respondents from KIs reveal that platforms facilitate TF-GBV, with Facebook initiating smears (with the majority ranking it as the highest), WhatsApp coordinating them (ranked second), and X making them go viral (ranked third), when ranked by platforms used most frequently by abusers. Respondents described how smears start on Facebook with manipulated images that are spread via WhatsApp groups for targeted harassment and then go viral on X through hashtags and bots. This multi-platform dynamic blurs online and offline boundaries, as abuse spills into radio jingles or community meetings. State variations show that Kogi is also a hotspot for defamation across phases, while cyberbullying is consistent. State similarities show that Facebook, as a preferred abuse platform, dominates everywhere, but Kogi's X usage ties with Facebook to emphasise how multiple platforms were accessed to shape abuse reach.

The differences between states highlight the importance of context. Kogi tops the states where female politicians experience abuse, accounting for 45% (or 8418) of total posts analysed. Again, this is linked to visibility, and has been driven by Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan's high-profile senatorial bid, with spikes in November 2022 (following the campaign launch) and September 2023 (following the tribunal judgement), as shown in Figure 3. Rivers follows at 30% (5612), fuelled by Tonto Dikeh's deputy governorship run, peaking in May 2023 amid leadership tussles. Imo and Ondo lag at 15% (2806) and 10% (1870), respectively, as a result of lower candidate visibility.

Such disparities are telling; in Kogi and Rivers, where women challenge entrenched power (e.g., Akpoti-Uduaghan's tribunal push), TF-GBV escalates as a backlash mechanism, coordinating via hashtags like 'silence her supporters'. In contrast, Ondo's low activity reflects not safety but marginalisation; women's invisibility protects them from attack but also from opportunity, perpetuating underrepresentation.

KII findings corroborate this; defamation and smears had the most case mentions (8 of 20) by the women, while other forms, including sexualized insults and slurs (3 of 20) and cyberbullying (2 of 20) illustrate defamation's dominance as a mechanism to silence women in politics, mirroring patterns observed in X.

These patterns, unchecked by policy gaps, illustrate the strategic use of TF-GBV to undermine women during high-stakes periods. The study findings confirm recent case studies and media narratives, which have noted the online harassment of female candidates in the 2023 elections, revealing how bots and trolls, often affiliated with parties, orchestrate campaigns of misinformation (Ogunlana-Nkanga, 2023; Fadare, 2023).

The role of party affiliates and opponents in propagating abuse

Respondents noted that some incidents of TF-GBV are driven by actors linked to political parties, particularly youth wings, media teams, and volunteer loyalists who operate as informal 'strike forces'. These groups may act organically or be incentivised through money, favours, or promises of future appointments, blurring the line between spontaneous support and orchestrated harassment. As one respondent explained:

'Most of them posting negative things on social media do not even do it on their own. They are being paid, and many of these people are within the party.'

KII, Female Politician, Kogi State

At the core of these campaigns are identifiable rivals – both male and female – who contest the same political positions or are aligned with competing factions. Their competitiveness often seeds defamation, targeted insults and direct threats that travel through partisan networks. Respondents described how organised campaigns are sometimes coordinated through bloggers and influencers, with financing that may originate outside the party ecosystem but is executed through it. This points to a hybrid market of political communication where plausible deniability is preserved while attacks scale rapidly (Folarin et al., 2022).

Even when initial posts originate from partisan actors, the content often spreads to unaffiliated individuals who amplify the message through comments and shares in WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and X threads. This diffusion creates a 'community mob' dynamic that makes attribution difficult.

As one respondent noted:

'You make a viewpoint, somebody captures only where you are shouting, posts it to ridicule you.'

KII, Female Politician, Rivers State

While men are the chief perpetrators of these attacks, respondents also noted that women sometimes participate in online slander – particularly in highly competitive contexts or when a woman is perceived as an 'outsider' to local norms. This reflects intra-gender policing of respectability and hierarchy within party structures:

'Sometimes, even women take to social media and abuse women, calling them prostitutes.'

KII Women Leader, Rivers State.

Bots and automated/anonymous accounts

Respondents repeatedly described rapid cascades, copy-paste phrasing, and mass retweet patterns that suggest automation. Platform data constraints and post deletions limit conclusive proof, but the perceived coordination aligns with known tactics in political influence operations (Olaniran and Diepeveen, 2023). In practice, the presence of anonymous or semi-automated accounts heightens volume, accelerates the abuse, and complicates redress.

Perpetrators who are anonymous digital warriors are often pseudonymous trolls (60% of X posts analysed), amplified by retweets and quote tweets, with intra-party origins in primaries shifting to inter-party during elections. Indirect harassment that targets supporters or families highlights the ripple effect of TF-GBV, turning digital spaces into amplifiers of threats of harm. Bots and pseudonymous accounts make attribution difficult, but patterns suggest party affiliation, as seen in the use of coordinated hashtags during elections. Global parallels show similar tactics in other democracies, where online trolls target female leaders to maintain power imbalances (Wagner, 2020; Golbeck, 2025).

The study's data aligns with wider research findings, such as Falobi's (2025) analysis of the escalation of TF-GBV with digital penetration, where misogyny intersects with politics to silence women. Temporal dynamics also reveal coordination, with similar phrasing in posts suggesting organised efforts, though this is hard to prove without platform transparency. The full extent of TF-GBV from the X analysis of this study could not be fully ascertained because of moderation gaps on the X platform, where 30% (42,028) of the abusive content scraped had been deleted, and approximately 40% (56,038) of the posts from private accounts were inaccessible for analysis.

3.2 Digital warriors and their targets amongst women politicians: Intersectional vulnerabilities and power dynamics

This study finds that TF-GBV does not strike indiscriminately; it targets women who are ambitious, young, and who have high public visibility, weaponising identities to maintain male dominance (AMWIK, 2024). High-profile women bear the brunt. The attacks on high-profile women can be explained in part by the threat they pose to men within their parties, who are some of the most common perpetrators of the attacks. Recent studies have highlighted this dynamic, advocating structural changes to address it (Rose et al., 2024; Bonu Rosenkranz and Barone, 2025). Tables 4 and 5 below summarise the most common abuse for prominent politicians.

Table 4 Ranking of candidates' abuse mentions

Candidate	Mentions	TF-GBV abuses	Abusive terms	Party	Constituency	State
Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan	656	50	thin (21), old (15), expose (3), threat (2), witch (1), stupid (1), shameless (1), blackmail (1), crazy (1), weak (1), idiot (1), iron lady (1)	PDP	Kogi Central Senatorial District	Kogi
Tonto Dikeh	378	67	old (26), thin (14), fat (6), ashawo (6), threat (5), backstabber (4), hag (3), expose (2), cheap (1), prostitute (1), puppet (1), feminist (1)	ADC	Deputy Governorship Candidate	Rivers
Ipalibo Harry Banigo	36	4	old (3), hag (1)	PDP	Rivers West Senatorial District	Rivers

From the X data, Kogi and Rivers were identified as hotspots, given their prominent women candidates, including Natasha Akpoti-Uduaghan (the highest number of mentions) and Tonto Dikeh (the highest number of morality-based attacks). Less visible candidates faced minimal abuse, suggesting that visibility increases risk. These attacks sometimes illustrate how personal histories are weaponised. In Ondo and Imo, lower activity correlates with fewer prominent female candidates, highlighting that TF-GBV targets those who challenge the status quo.

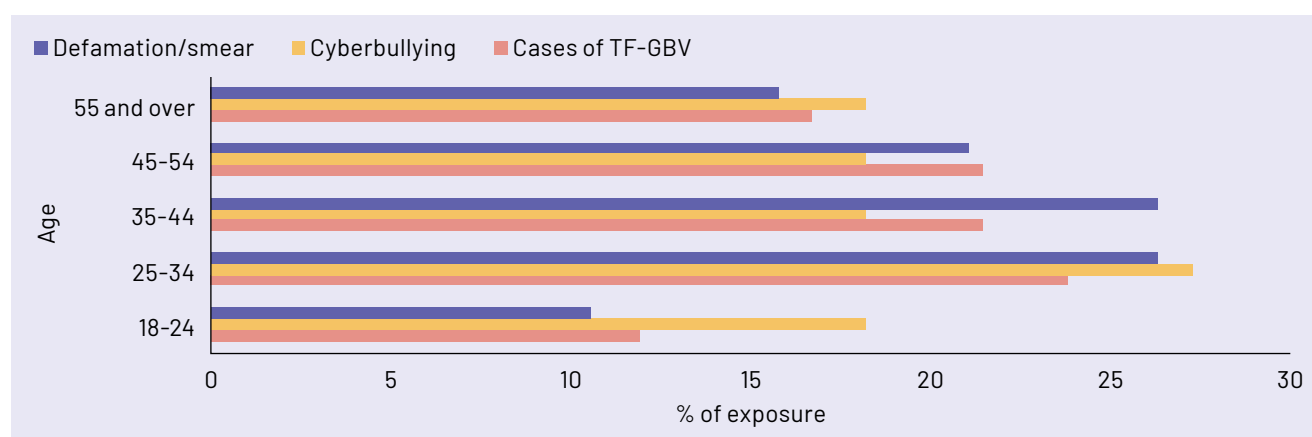
Table 5 Candidate mentions by abuse categories

Candidates	Identity-based attacks	(Purely) gender-stereotypes based attacks	Attacks against appearance and personality	Attacks against moral judgement	Attacks against competence and capacity to govern	Attacks against policies, political and ideological alignment	Other/unspecified
Natasha Akpoti	43.68% (435)	12.50% (513)	0.00%	45.45% (370)	80.00% (2510)	51.00% (42)	0.00%
Tonto Dike	52.87% (527)	87.50% (3594)	75.00% (2990)	54.55% (445)	20.00% (627)	49.00% (41)	0.00%
Ipalibo Harry Banigo	3.45% (34)	0.00%	25.00% (997)	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Vivian Ottih	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
Totals/ averages	100% (996)	100% (4107)	100% (3987)	100% (815)	100% (3137)	100% (83)	0.00%

Targets pay a 'visibility penalty'. In political discourse, it appears that women in politics who are in the spotlight face the most targeting, while less prominent women often fade into the background and are largely overlooked. However, findings from X show that another politically experienced candidate, Ipalibo Harry Banigo, ran for the Senate in Rivers and was less targeted. This disparity raises intriguing questions about the nature of targeted abuse – suggesting that it may be more influenced by the prominence of the women's political opponents than by their political aspirations alone.

This prompts us also to consider whether society's gaze inherently seeks to scrutinise certain women more than others, thus highlighting the connection between visibility, prominence and vulnerability to online abuse. Regardless, visibility invites violence, but invisibility offers no real safety either.

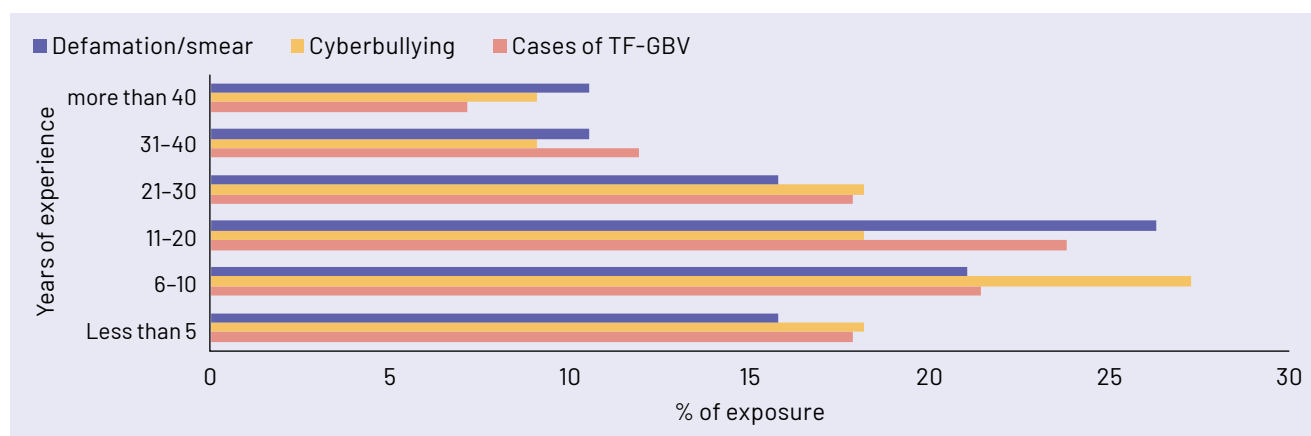
Figure 6 Respondents' age groups vs exposure to types of TF-GBV



Intersections exacerbate online harm. Findings from the KII in this study highlight how gendered discrimination intersects with age, as shown in Figure 6: younger women (25–34 years) face more abuse, including sextortion and barriers, than older women (>55), who were more likely to endure doxxing. Young women are seen as ambitious threats. Older women face attacks on their legacy, with doxxing affecting their families.

Experience matters: Findings from women in politics with 10–20 years of experience reveal they have the highest exposure, with cyberstalking rates increasing as the women consolidate power. New entrants (<5 years) face gatekeeping via defamation and risks of sextortion, while veterans (>40 years) are less targeted but still deal with lingering defamation, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7 Years of experience in politics vs exposure to TF-GBV



Party structures as gatekeepers: Beyond online violence, women face institutional barriers within party systems that limit their ascent. Party structures confine women to mobiliser roles, viewing advancement as a threat. This power dynamic, rooted in policy voids, sustains exclusion. For example, as one of our respondents from Imo state highlighted, cultural biases mean that women in politics are seen as an ‘abomination.’ These barriers intersect with ethnicity, as in Rivers state, where one of the women in politics highlighted her personal experience of stigma because she married outside her ethnic group:

‘I was highly discriminated against because I am married to someone outside.’

KII, Female Politician, Rivers State

Two recent studies shed light on the complex relationship between norms and women’s roles. The development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC-ALIGN)(2023) study on gender norms and media narratives highlights the biases that confine women to lesser roles. Meanwhile, a UN Women (2024a) case study illustrates how these norms exacerbate gatekeeping. These findings underscore the need to recognise TF-GBV as deeply rooted in power structures and emphasise that institutional reforms are essential to dismantle vulnerabilities and address the underlying biases that perpetuate this issue.

3.3 Impacts and spillovers for women in politics: the human and democratic cost of TF-GBV

Beyond screen bites, TF-GBV spills over into personal and political lives, affecting women’s reputations, straining families, and forcing withdrawals that erode Nigeria’s democracy. Findings highlight that the impact clusters around reputational damage, distress and resource loss, with offline spillovers amplifying the harm and imposing a ‘safety-tax’ on women – additional fees for legal and security support to keep safe – diverting resources and energy from political work.

Impacts are multifaceted: The female respondents have ranked the impact of TF-GBV, with a majority ranking reputational damage as the most severe (6 of 20), followed by psychological distress (5 of 20), and voter/funding loss (3 of 20). The patterns of these impacts can be seen around key political moments: the pre-election period shows reputational impact peaking as smears deter candidacy; during the elections, psychological distress intensifies amid the burdens of campaigning; and post-elections, respondents report that family strains linger on. Respondents also described how defamation erodes trust, with one noting:

‘They called me names before the primaries even started, so people already saw me as unfit before I spoke a word... They mocked me as a ‘market woman,’ saying I do not belong in leadership.’

KII, Female Politician, Imo State

Psychological distress manifests as anxiety or depression, with post-election spikes as a result of persistent abuse. Offline spillovers include family threats and economic drains:

‘At a point, my children got tired of me contesting because it kept affecting my person, and it kept affecting their education in the sense that resources that I was supposed to use on them would be diverted into politics.’

KII, Female Politician, Kogi State

This ‘safety-tax’ involves the costs of legal fees, security and time, disadvantaging women financially. One of the respondents’ cases shows escalation, like doxxing, leading to physical harassment, as in Rivers, where the phone numbers of one of the women in politics were leaked.

There are also broader democratic costs, including eroded trust in institutions and their parties, with the withdrawal of women contributing to low representation. Recent reports on GBV in Nigeria’s politics highlight the implications for development, where violence hinders gender equality goals (Arum et al., 2024; Ugwu, 2024). The study findings also align with studies that point out the profound human costs, with psychological distress potentially leading to long-term mental health issues, corroborating studies from other regions (Bardall et al., 2020). Economically, funding losses affect campaigns, thereby perpetuating male dominance. These impacts underscore TF-GBV as a barrier to democracy and require holistic responses to mitigate spillovers and support women’s resilience.

3.4 Perceptions, responses, and resistance: party inaction amid women’s resilience

This study’s findings reveal that party perceptions normalise TF-GBV as ‘rough politics’, leading to party responses that are informal and ineffective. This, in turn, leaves women with little recourse other than to build ‘gendered resilience’. In Nigeria’s patronage-driven politics, where ideology is weak and negative gender norms permeate, TF-GBV is framed as inevitable, leaving women to develop resilient strategies for survival. Findings from Nigeria align with global evidence showing limited institutionalised responses to TF-GBV, alongside an urgent need for gender-centred solutions to counter this barrier (Rose et al., 2024). As one respondent notes:

‘As far as the party is concerned, they are not doing anything. Women are left alone with their problems.’

KII Women in Politics, Ondo State

Party elites often avoid addressing TF-GBV not out of ignorance but out of political calculation. In Nigeria’s highly transactional party system, survival depends on maintaining coalitions of local

power brokers, online influencers and financial patrons. Publicly condemning digital attacks – particularly when orchestrated by partisan supporters – risks alienating these actors, as one party official implied:

‘You do not discipline the people who help you win.’

KII, Party Leader, Ondo State

Rather than enforce norms or sanction offenders, parties tend to downplay incidents, framing them as ‘normal politics’ or advising women to ‘ignore it’. This strategic silence signals tolerance and ultimately normalises TF-GBV as an acceptable tool of political competition, reinforcing a system where women’s safety is subordinated to vote mobilisation and alliance management.

Political party representatives interviewed viewed TF-GBV as a byproduct of contestations that are part of Nigeria’s political system, arguing that it is a situation that women just need to endure. In this regard, 93.16% (15 of 16) of party representative respondents described TF-GBV from a ‘gendered resilience’ viewpoint, suggesting that women need to toughen up. This shifts the burden to individuals, perpetuating impunity. The women in politics also tend to align with this expectation, as one of the party leader’s notes:

‘If you are not a strong woman, you will withdraw.’

KII, Party Leader, Ondo State

Interviews with women politicians yielded key findings: parties’ responses to TF-GBV were overwhelmingly weak, informal or absent. This pattern persisted across all political moments and was consistent in all four states. Throughout these states, weak enforcement reveals that political parties do not actively address TF-GBV with disciplinary measures. Variations at the state level show how this gap manifests differently: in Imo State, party members tend to escalate complaints internally, but these rarely lead to meaningful sanctions; in Kogi and Ondo states, enforcement remains largely ineffective, highlighting parties’ reluctance to discipline perpetrators; and in Rivers State, the absence of formal responses correlates with weak enforcement and complaints that escalate within the party.

These patterns point to a deeper structural issue: political parties are hesitant to use their disciplinary powers to protect women in politics, instead relying on ad hoc responses that perpetuate patriarchal norms and sustain those (men) who are already in power. The result is a system in which TF-GBV is tolerated across contexts. One party leader highlighted the limits of party authority in the digital space:

**‘The political parties have no power to control what goes online.
They should only sanction members who go against the constitution.
The social media platform can also block the offenders.’**

KII Female Party Leader, Imo State

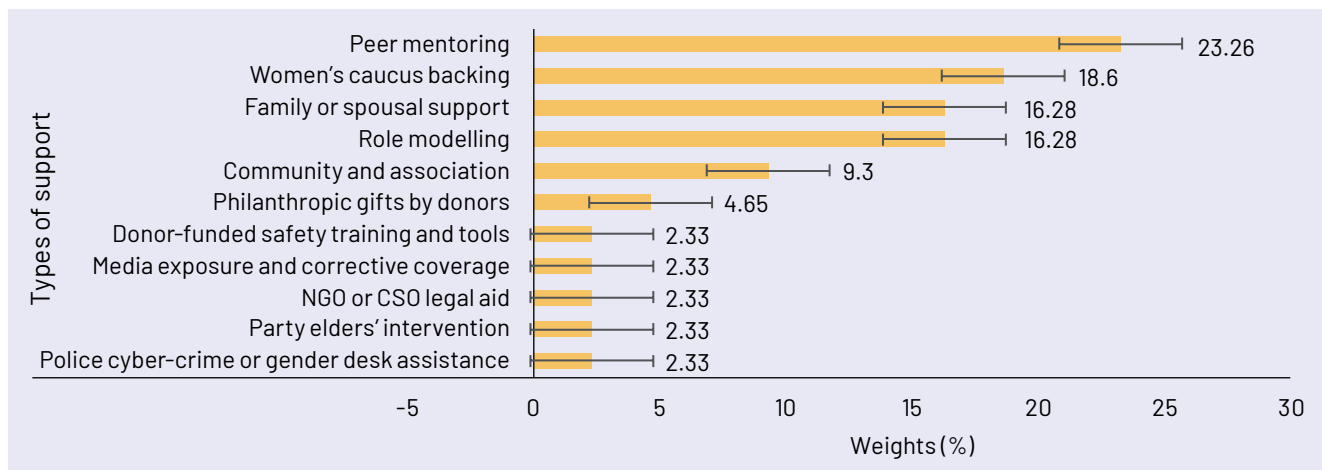
This perspective illustrates how leaders deflect responsibility on to external actors, such as social media companies, while overlooking the tools parties themselves have – such as the ability to discipline members or issue public statements – to curb abuse.

The rankings from the women in politics of support received following TF-GBV shown in Figure 8 reveal that, in the absence of recourse and justice within the party system, women opt for collective resilience strategies. Collective resilience often takes the form of peer mentoring, women’s caucuses and family support. As one woman politician notes:

‘It was the women’s caucus that stood by me.’

KII, Female Politician, Kogi State

Figure 8 Respondents' ranking of support received



Respondents described efforts to resist TF-GBV through formal mechanisms, such as filing petitions, submitting written complaints, or approaching party and state institutions for redress. These actions reflected a determination to move beyond passive endurance and to hold perpetrators accountable within legal or administrative systems. However, such attempts were rarely successful. As one female politician explained:

**'I submitted a written complaint, but they only filed it away.
No one was sanctioned, no feedback given.'**

KII, Female Politician, Rivers State

The lack of institutional follow-through highlights the weakness of accountability structures within political parties. Complaints were often absorbed bureaucratically but were not acted upon, leaving the women without justice. What's more, reporting did not halt ongoing harassment; instead, women often remained exposed to sustained or renewed attacks, illustrating how formal remedies are undermined by institutional inertia.

Ultimately, while the petitions of women in politics' and their use of legal channels demonstrate agency and a refusal to normalise abuse, the absence of a credible institutional response not only discourages further reporting but also reinforces perpetrators' impunity. Faced with harassment and limited institutional protection, many women turned to defensive strategies that prioritised self-preservation over visibility. One approach was self-censorship, in which women deliberately reduced their online presence to avoid further attacks. As a female politician admitted:

'I stopped posting my activities because each time I did, insults followed.'

KII, Female Politician, Ondo State

This demonstrates how TF-GBV shapes women's digital engagement directly, forcing them to retreat from online spaces that are increasingly central to political campaigns, visibility and citizen engagement. In more severe cases, the only available coping mechanism was withdrawal from active political life, particularly when harassment extended beyond the individual to affect family well-being. As one female politician reflected:

'I just pulled out; the abuse was too much for my family.'

KII, Female Politician, Kogi State

Such decisions highlight the spillover effects of online abuse into the domestic sphere, where the reputational and psychological costs of TF-GBV compel women to sacrifice political ambitions in order to protect their households.

While these coping strategies allowed women to survive in politics – for a while at least – they carried significant costs: reduced participation, diminished visibility and truncated political careers. This pattern reflects wider global evidence showing that online abuse leads women to disengage from digital platforms, self-censor political speech, or abandon candidacies altogether (Krook, 2020; Bardall, 2013; UN Women, 2022). In Nigeria, where digital platforms play an increasingly central role in mobilisation and political communication, the forced retreat of women from these spaces undermines both gender equality and democratic inclusivity.

3.5 Gender blindness of political parties and regulatory bodies' non-responsiveness to TF-GBV

Nigerian political parties and regulatory bodies remain largely gender-blind. The European Institute for Gender Equality (2016) defines gender blindness as the failure to recognise that the roles and responsibilities of women and girls, and men and boys, are shaped by specific social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Gender-blind policies ignore these differences, thereby maintaining the status quo and failing to address structural gender inequalities. This is highlighted by the failure to address TF-GBV against women in politics. But what accounts for the gap?

Gender blindness of political party regulatory bodies: why the gap?

Despite the existence of frameworks like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Gender Policy (2021–2025), a significant gap remains in addressing TF-GBV, particularly against women in politics. This gap appears to stem from a combination of institutional oversight, limited enforcement mechanisms, and a narrow conceptualisation of gender inclusion that prioritises symbolic representation over substantive protection.

The INEC Gender Policy, while affirming support for female voters and promoting gender balance among poll workers, is notably silent on the digital dimensions of political violence. It fails to address online harassment, threats or misinformation targeting women politicians. No standards are imposed on political parties, nor are there penalties for non-compliance. Although the INEC policy aligns with gender equality provisions in Section 42 of the 1999 Constitution, INEC's own Strategic Plan and the Electoral Act, this alignment does not extend to digital harms, revealing a blind spot in the policy's scope.

One hypothesis for this omission is that institutional gender policies often focus on visible, quantifiable metrics – such as the number of women voters or gender-balanced staffing – while neglecting less tangible but equally harmful digital threats. This is despite evidence that during the 2023 elections, 40% of female politicians faced threats, 32% were targeted with fake news, and 50% experienced gendered hate speech (African Polling Institute, 2019). The policy's failure to address these realities suggests a disconnect between institutional gender commitments and the evolving nature of political violence.

While INEC has made strides in internal gender reforms, these have not translated into binding obligations for political parties. The policy lacks mechanisms to monitor digital campaigns or sanction parties that orchestrate or enable TF-GBV. This regulatory vacuum is compounded by incomplete domestication of international commitments, such as Nigeria's ratification of CEDAW (1985) and General Recommendation No. 19 on GBV, which remain weakly enforced in national law. Legal instruments like the Cybercrimes Act 2015 (Government of Nigeria, 2015) have attempted to address online harms, but their effectiveness is limited. Section 24 on cyberstalking, for example, does not

mandate platform accountability for TF-GBV, and its vague definitions of ‘harassment’ risk being misused to silence political dissent, including by women (LIRAD, 2024).

Similarly, INEC’s Electoral Offences guidelines and Electoral Risk Management Tool focus on physical threats and environmental risks, omitting digital threats such as cyberstalking and doxxing. This reflects a broader institutional tendency to prioritise traditional forms of violence while underestimating the strategic and organised nature of digital abuse in political contexts.

The Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC), which oversees party conduct, also illustrates this gap. While its 2021 Code of Conduct promotes equal participation and discourages inflammatory language, including on social media, it lacks enforcement mechanisms. During the 2023 elections, TF-GBV persisted despite these provisions (Daily Trust, 2019; Mom, 2025). Voter education mandates were often co-opted to advance partisan narratives, frequently at the expense of women candidates.

This suggests that the gap is not merely a matter of policy omission but reflects a systemic reluctance to confront digital political violence – possibly because of the difficulty of attribution, the political utility of online abuse, and the lack of political will to regulate party affiliates and digital actors. In contrast, global standards, such as those recommended by UN Women (2024b), advocate for explicit TF-GBV provisions in electoral codes – an approach yet to be adopted in Nigeria.

Party constitutions: Promises of equality but not protection from TF-GBV

A gender review and analysis of the constitutions of Nigeria’s four major political parties, as shown in Table 6, reveals that none address TF-GBV explicitly, despite their stated commitments to women’s participation.

Table 6 TF-GBV in the constitutions of Nigeria’s four leading political parties

DESCRIPTIONS	APC	PDP	LP	NNPP
Explicit mention of TF-GBV	No mention	No mention	No mention	No mention
Recognition of gender-based violence (general)	Not mentioned explicitly	Not mentioned explicitly	Not mentioned explicitly	Not mentioned explicitly
Promotion of women’s rights and development	Yes – ‘Women’s representation is promoted, e.g., at least one female delegate from each LGA (Art. 12.1(ix)); designated Women Leaders in party structures’.	Yes – ‘Support the emancipation and participation of women’ and reserve ‘not less than 35%... for women’ (Section 6(5), (7))	Yes – ‘To ensure gender balance in governance’ (Article 8(i))	Yes – ‘Encouragement of the full development of... Nigerian women’ (Article 6:12)
Provisions on digital rights or online safety	No	No	No	No

Table 6 TF-GBV in the constitutions of Nigeria's four leading political parties (continued)

DESCRIPTIONS	APC	PDP	LP	NNPP
Mechanism for addressing harassment/abuse in the party	While Article 21 outlines general disciplinary procedures, there is no specific mechanism in place to address harassment or abuse, whether digital or otherwise.	Sections 57, 58, 59, disciplinary procedure, offences, and sections. There is no mention of digital harassment or abuse.	Articles 20 and 23 outline disciplinary procedures and the code of conduct. No mechanisms specific to harassment or online abuse.	Article 17 outlines general disciplinary procedures; however, it does not specify a mechanism for addressing harassment or digital abuse.
Ethical or disciplinary code regarding digital conduct	Absent – there is no specific code of conduct concerning digital behaviour.	Absent – there is no specific code of conduct concerning digital behaviour.	Absent – there is no specific code of conduct regarding digital behaviour.	Absent – there is no specific code of conduct regarding digital behaviour.
Digital participation awareness or protections	Not addressed	Not addressed	Not addressed	Not addressed

Source: APC (2024), INEC (2025), LP (2024), NNPP (2024), PDP (2024)

The gender analysis of the All Progressive Congress (APC) Constitution (APC, 2024) revealed that while it mentions protecting the interests of women ('To protect the interest of... women' under Article 7 (vii)), there is no specific reference to TF-GBV or actions to prevent or provide redress for the targeted women per se. The Constitution states that it seeks to 'eliminate all forms of discrimination and social injustice' in its Preamble. There is, however, no reference to physical, psychological or sexual harassment, either within party structures or during electoral processes, nor is there any recognition of the specific risks faced by women in public life. Consequently, technology-facilitated abuse is not merely omitted as a digital oversight, but as part of a wider absence of GBV protections altogether. While it commits to 'promote the development of science, technology and local expertise' (Article 7 (xv)), the Constitution does not mention any intent to regulate or respond to the misuse of technology against women in politics. Furthermore, none of the sections detailing disciplinary procedures, party administration, or the roles of party officers include mechanisms to address TF-GBV or create safe digital spaces for party members, particularly women (APC Constitution, 2019). This party, which controls over 80% of elected seats alongside the PDP, is part of a party system that has been criticised for patronage-driven politics that sideline gender issues (Cheeseman, 2016).

Similarly, the Constitution of the main opposition **Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)** does not address TF-GBV explicitly. While it emphasises inclusivity, women's participation and respect for human rights, as seen in Article 6(5), which states that the party 'shall support the emancipation and participation of women by encouraging their representation at all levels,' there is no direct mention of digital or online violence (Peoples Democratic Party, 2024). This reflects a broader ideological void where defections undermine consistent policy.

The Constitution of another major opposition party, the **Labour Party (LP)**, falls short in recognising or addressing TF-GBV explicitly. It includes commitments to gender balance (Article 8(i)) and rapid technological advancement (Article 8(l)), and its structure includes women leaders, which can be

leveraged for advocacy. However, there is no acknowledgement that technology can be used to perpetuate violence against women and other marginalised groups, or of the actions required to prevent such acts. The party's 'Code of Conduct at Elections' and member obligations are silent on online conduct and abuse, leaving a gap in the protection of members, especially women, from digital harassment or violence, particularly in the context of political participation (Labour Party, 2024).

The Constitution of the **New Nigeria People's Party (NNPP)**, while promoting the 'encouragement of the full development of the political, cultural, social and economic potentials of Nigerian women' and opposing 'ethnic, gender discrimination, political and religious intolerance' (Article 6, Objectives; Article 8(g)), lacks provisions relating to TF-GBV (New Nigeria People's Party, 2024). The Constitution is also thin on gender considerations.

Party representatives' views: normalisation and ad hoc fixes

Findings from the gender analysis of party constitutions reveal gender blindness and constitutional gaps. These gaps are echoed in KII, where party leaders frame TF-GBV as outside the scope of their parties' constitutions. As one leader noted:

'Our constitution is our law, and it does not talk about online violence, so we cannot act.'

KII, Party Leader, Kogi State

This institutional gender blindness perpetuates a patriarchal cultural norm where TF-GBV is dismissed as 'part of the job', risking women's withdrawal and democratic erosion. When the search light is beamed onto broader legal instruments, such as the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act 2015, which has been domesticated in only 34 states, it reveals that this law addresses harassment but omits cyber forms of harassment, such as doxxing. The 2023 National Data Protection Act (Government of Nigeria, 2023) offers protection to all citizens against breaches but ignores sextortion. Recent reforms to the 2015 Cybercrimes Act in 2024 broadened the definition of offences but still lack a gendered lens, as critics argue the vague terms allow for misuse against women in politics (LIRAD, 2024; Cybercrimes Act, 2024). These policy gaps in wider legal ecosystem also intersect with and reinforce gender norms that shape political parties, where women are often confined to mobilising roles, rather than becoming part of party leadership (Quadri, 2015). In essence, this is a manifestation of deeper patriarchal norms, where laws such as Section 34 of the 1999 Constitution, which pertains to dignity, are invoked but not enforced in digital spaces.

Closing these gaps requires more than policy tweaks; it calls for a fundamental shift in how institutions perceive gender in the digital age, while also recognising the connection between online and offline violence. The study's findings demonstrate, with evidence, how the absence of explicit TF-GBV protective provisions in Nigerian political party constitutions and in regulatory bodies normalises abuse, perpetuates impunity and discourages women's political engagement.

4 Conclusions

Gendered political violence has long been recognised as a mechanism to maintain patriarchal control in politics and in society. Bardall et al. (2020) disentangle this phenomenon, arguing that gendered motives arise when violence is used to preserve men's hegemonic dominance in politics. This study's findings highlight the salient nature of TF-GBV against women in Nigerian politics, which contributes to barriers to women's political participation. The findings also reveal a disconnect between the increasing online violence directed at women in politics and institutional safeguards within Nigeria's political party ecosystem.

Key insights underscore the fact that TF-GBV is not merely an incidental byproduct of online engagement but a structured mechanism that intersects with electoral cycles, personal identities and institutional deficiencies to perpetuate gender inequalities and undermine democratic equity.

This study also confirms, through a focus on temporal spikes during political moments, that online abuse targets women in politics as a barrier that affects their likelihood of remaining in politics. Yet political parties, despite constitutional commitments to gender inclusivity, rarely intervene, perpetuating patriarchal norms through informal resolutions, weak enforcement, and an expectation of 'gendered resilience'.

Regulatory bodies, such as INEC and IPAC, also fall short, omitting TF-GBV from their risk frameworks and codes of conduct. At the same time, the constitutions of major political parties (APC, PDP, LP, NNPP) lack explicit provisions. This study also reveals that Nigeria's political parties perceive TF-GBV as a byproduct of contestation, rather than as a gendered harm.

The mechanisms of TF-GBV are diverse and adaptive, intensifying around the pre-election, election, and post-election phases. Defamation and smear campaigns dominate, peaking during post-election periods, where manipulated content portrays women as morally unfit and spills into offline arenas. Sexualised slurs weaponise patriarchal stereotypes, labelling women as 'prostitutes' or 'ashewo', with rates of such abuse increasing in post-election periods. Sustained forms of online violence in post-election periods, like cyberbullying and cyberstalking, create constant surveillance, while threats, doxxing, and sextortion escalate physical risks.

The perpetrators are often intra-party actors who view women as threats, with external rivals amplifying harms. Platforms like Facebook serve as initial battlegrounds, WhatsApp enables coordination, and Instagram and X facilitate virality, blurring digital and institutional boundaries.

This study's findings indicate that identities and demographic characteristics have a profound influence on experiences, with intersections exacerbating vulnerabilities. Younger women (25–34 years) face entry barriers and TF-GBV such as sextortion, while mid-career groups (35–44 years) endure sustained attacks during leadership consolidation. TF-GBV against women in politics with experience peaks at 10–20 years in politics, where cyber-stalking intensifies as women challenge hierarchies. Marital status, ethnicity, and party affiliations, while having a lower influence, can still compound stigma, as seen in discriminatory comments like 'go back to the kitchen' tropes or ethnic prejudice. These findings align with global patterns, where TF-GBV intersects with offline biases against women's ambition.

Different identities and career stages expose women to varying risks and call for differentiated responses. Entry-level women, for example, may need stronger protections against sextortion and online reputational harm, while mid-career women would benefit from institutional backing to withstand sustained digital smear campaigns. Senior women who challenge hierarchies require

robust legal and party-led enforcement mechanisms to curb cyber-stalking and intimidation. Incorporating this nuance into party policies and internal codes of conduct would ensure resources and protections are targeted to the moments and identities where they are most urgently needed.

The impacts of TF-GBV span the personal, professional and political realms. For women in politics who are compelled to reduce their visibility, self-censorship and withdrawal erode their political viability, while for those who continue, security and legal costs impose unequal burdens. Offline escalations, such as physical harm or intimidation, underscore the hybrid nature of TF-GBV. However, the women in politics who experience TF-GBV are mostly left to cope with it on their own. Support is fragmented, with peer mentoring, caucuses and family networks dominating, highlighting institutional gaps.

These gaps are shaped by entrenched factors, including women's historical marginalisation as mobilisers rather than leaders, male-dominated structures, and a normalisation of abuse as 'part of politics'. Despite this, many of the women in politics exhibit remarkable resilience.

Based on these findings, this study offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations for policy and practice

Addressing TF-GBV requires a multifaceted and phased approach that shifts responsibility from individual women to institutions, aligning with Nigeria's commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and national gender frameworks. This study's findings suggest that progress in addressing critical social issues is being hindered by a lack of political will and the absence of incentives for political parties to pursue meaningful change. Long-term societal shifts in social norms and enhanced democratic accountability are essential to generate demand for these parties to adapt and evolve. Parties willing to act can prioritise the following actions.

Practice recommendations for political parties

1. To address the gap in the Nigerian political parties' code of conduct regarding TF-GBV, parties should incorporate explicit clauses that define TF-GBV offences, enforce a sanction ladder, and allocate dedicated resources focused on survivor-centred principles. Drawing on successful models like Mexico's National Register of Sanctioned Persons (CONAVIM, 2020) could enhance enforcement mechanisms. In addition, establishing rapid-response hotlines for real-time support, similar to Brazil's 'Ligue 180' (Government of Brazil, 2025), would ensure survivor-centred referral pathways. Furthermore, adopting social media codes similar to those of the UK Labour and Conservative parties would clarify standards of conduct and associated sanctions (LP, 2025).
2. To address the impact of TF-GBV in politics, it is essential to build supportive environments through awareness programmes that sensitise members about its gendered effects and challenge normalised abuse narratives. This includes promoting male ally advocacy by training party leaders to publicly condemn harassment, fostering a shift from 'rough politics' to a zero-tolerance approach. Both OSCE/ODIHR and IPU³ recommend internal capacity-building initiatives to reduce online abuse and its chilling effects on women in politics, while highlighting the importance of leadership signalling to change norms and retain survivors. (OSCE, 2023).

3. Support cross-party women's caucuses such as the National Women Leaders Forum in Nigeria (a national women leaders quorum of Nigeria's 19 registered political parties), supported by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD, 2024), as safe spaces for survivors and those who seek to foster greater inclusivity, participation and representation of women and other underrepresented groups to share experiences and mobilise collective action against TF-GBV. This study observed reliance on informal peer support; formal caucus backing aligns with IPU evidence on reducing isolation and improving institutional responses to online abuse (IPU, 2016).

Policy and institutional recommendations for political parties

The findings of this study reveal that political parties are not neutral when it comes to TF-GBV; rather, they are often complicit or passive enablers of such abuse. Party-affiliated actors – including youth wings, media teams, and loyalist influencers – are often informal reinforcers of online harassment, with little to no accountability. This environment of impunity is sustained by the absence of legal mandates, weak enforcement mechanisms, and a lack of political will to address digital harms. Without clear incentives or consequences, parties have little motivation to implement internal protections or sanction perpetrators. To address these systemic gaps, the following policy and institutional reforms are recommended:

4. Strengthen legal frameworks to recognise and address TF-GBV explicitly. This recommendation stems from findings that weak enforcement and the absence of explicit legal recognition leave women without effective redress, forcing them to rely on fragmented informal support. Parties and state actors could therefore consider:
 - i. Amending the Cybercrimes Act (2024) to mandate platforms to monitor and/or report TF-GBV, strengthening Section 24's harassment provisions.
 - ii. Integrating TF-GBV into the Electoral Act (2022), under Part VII offences, requiring INEC to monitor online campaigns and sanction parties for member-perpetrated abuse.
 - iii. Strictly enforcing the National Data Protection Act (2023) strictly, mandating data controllers (platforms) implement TF-GBV-specific safeguards, like automated flagging, in line with Sections 39–40.
5. Capture TF-GBV in the review process of INEC's Gender Policy (2021 to 2025). This study's findings demonstrate that the lack of political will within parties remains a major hindrance to the adoption of internal protections. An INEC policy initiative through an updated and revised INEC's Gender Policy, though top-down, would create an enabling environment for parties to mainstream TF-GBV as part of their compliance obligations.
6. Develop and incorporate TF-GBV guidelines under the Inter-Party Advisory Council (IPAC) peace accord process. This would respond directly to evidence that party silence and inaction normalise abuse. By embedding TF-GBV commitments in the IPAC code of conduct, parties would be compelled to recognise and respond collectively to online harms as a threat to democratic values.

Recommendations for the Government of Nigeria

7. Adopt the 2022 African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) Resolution on the Protection of Women Against Digital Violence in Africa (ACHPR/Res. 522 (LXXII) 2022), which provides comprehensive, gender transformative and culturally responsive strategies and approaches to readdress digital violence against women on the African continent.
8. Support the August 2024 Resolution of the African Commission on Human Rights and Peoples' Rights to undertake a study on digital violence against Women's Rights in Africa -ACHPR/RES.591(LXXX) 2024 and align with global efforts to strengthen social media regulations to address such violence. The proposed study aims to identify the underlying causes, manifestations and impacts of digital violence against women in Africa to inform the development of comprehensive norms and standards to assist states parties in addressing these violations.

Recommendations for long-term change enablers

These enablers can help to shift social norms and create incentives for political parties to act through the following actions.

9. **Development partners:** Development partners in Nigeria with robust GBV prevention and response portfolios should expand their focus to include TF-GBV. Given the emerging nature of TF-GBV in Nigeria, the country portfolios of development partners should be expanded to include support for formative research on the experiences of women in appointive and elected positions.

Development partners such as the United Nations University Operating Unit on Policy-Driven Electronic Governance (UNU-EGOV), hosting the International Conference on Theory and Practice of Electronic Governance in November 2025, in Abuja, Nigeria, may well consider incorporating and exploring issues of TF-GBV.

10. **Civil society organisations and academia:** Gender-facing civil society organisations in the research and advocacy space, such as the dRPC, would do well to catalyse interest and mobilise stakeholders, including academia, to work towards the implementation of all the recommendations above. This is particularly urgent and important in the light of the anticipated contestations around the upcoming General Elections of 2027.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that supports a global community of researchers, practitioners and activists, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – patriarchal gender norms.

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A woman at a protest rally in response to the government's rejection of a gender equality bill, holds a sign saying 'Nigeria needs more women in leadership'. Lagos, Nigeria, March 2022. © Tolu Owoeye | Shutterstock ID: 2150255371

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