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# The Invisible Majority: Rural Women, Digital Campaigns, and Political Violence

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## ABSTRACT

Research on gender-based violence (GBV) has primarily focused on non-political dimensions, while studies specifically on political gender-based violence (PGBV) tend to be reductionist, often centering on elite women candidates running for office. This narrow focus overlooks the experiences of rural women, who represent a vulnerable majority in political spaces and are increasingly affected by political violence including, and increasingly so, within digital environments. Moreover, the study of PGBV in virtual or digital spaces remains limited. This study attempted to address this gap by examining the experiences of rural women with gendered political violence in digital spaces with the aim of offering insights to both academic and policy cycles. Using a sequential exploratory mixed methods design and inspired by Intersectional Feminist framework (Crenshaw, 1991, improved by Hawk, 2015), this study investigates the influence of gender on rural voters' experiences of PGBV across nine identified digital domains. Data were gathered from self-administered surveys in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups discussions with rural voters and electoral policymaker and implementers from 2 sub-counties and 4 Wards from Siaya County. The study explored specific grounds for political violence, including social media harassment and intimidation, disinformation campaigns and character assassination, cyberstalking and surveillance, non-consensual sharing of private information (doxing), coercive use of messaging platforms, exclusion from digital campaign engagement, manipulative use of deepfakes and altered media, sexual harassment in virtual campaign spaces, and exploitation via mobile money scams. Findings reveal three key insights with implications for extant literature, policy, and gender mainstreaming initiatives. First, the relationships between gender and Political violence and digital politics are more nuanced than currently understood, underscoring the need to acknowledge and transform elitist ontologies in literature, policy and programming. Second, digital spaces offer challenges that must be addressed to advance meaningful gender mainstreaming for attainment of gender parity in politics. Finally this study provides a foundational list of variables, which though are neither conclusive nor comprehensive, can inform future, non-elite-focused analyses of PGBV. Overall, the study findings contribute to a broader understanding of PGBV in digital spaces, particularly from the perspective of vulnerable rural women (and rural voters generally).

**Keywords:** Rural Women Voters, Technology-facilitated Gender-Based Violence, Political Experiences

## INTRODUCTION

Gender has become an indispensable framework for analyzing developmental challenges, transcending academic boundaries and permeating policy discussions in a multi-inter-and-trans-disciplinary fashion (Fleischman, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011). The salience of gender in modern discourse is undeniable, yet its application often reveals a complex interplay between theory and practice. As policymakers increasingly recognize the significance of gender in shaping societal outcomes, they have also acknowledged the importance of integrating gender considerations into national strategies. This recognition is especially true for countries like Kenya, where gender has been formally embedded in development policy, as evidenced by the Gender and Development Policy (2019). However, the juxtaposition of gender scholarship with gender-focused programming raises several critical questions. Does the mere existence of such policies reflect a genuine understanding of the complexities of gender, or is it a reflection of a broader political discourse that oversimplifies the lived experiences of gendered subjects? For instance, while the transition from Women in Development (WID) to Women and Development (WAD), and ultimately to Gender and Development (GAD)

signifies an evolution in gender theory, it is crucial to ask whether these policy shifts genuinely align with the nuanced realities faced by the populations they aim to serve. This question becomes even more pertinent when examining the implementation of gender-sensitive programs, where the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application remains stark, as empirical studies have revealed (Ejumudo, 2013; Barker, 2007; Rathgeber, 1990).

Despite the growing prominence of gender in both academic research and policy formulation, the linkage between gender scholarship and its real-world application is often tenuous, leaving much to be desired in terms of cross-sectoral engagement (World Economic Forum [WEF], 2022; UNICEF, 2022). The very question of whether policymakers comprehend the dynamic evolution of gender as a field of study, or whether they merely adapt to evolving political trends, is critical to the advancement of meaningful gender policy. The complexities of such an inquiry are particularly apparent when evaluating policy-driven initiatives that aim to tackle gender-based violence (GBV), gender inequality, and other intersecting issues. For example, initiatives aimed at combating technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) highlight the ever-present chasm between gender research and its policy application. While these policies may reflect an idealized vision of gender justice, the implementation of gender-responsive actions often falls short due to gaps in understanding, insufficient resources, or poorly executed interventions.

Therefore, this conference on Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV) hosted in University of Kabianga (during which this paper was first presented) is not only timely but also reflects an urgent call for policymakers and scholars alike to engage in sustained discussions about the gendered implications of digital politics. Such discussions must go beyond theoretical frameworks and directly inform the development of policies and strategies that can effectively mitigate the risks of gendered political violence in virtual spaces.

Having said the foregoing, it is crucial to acknowledge that the gender discourse in Kenya, as in many other developing countries, remains in its nascent stages. The foundational debates around gender and development are still emerging, and while progress has been made in certain sub-domains such as education across all levels (Kenya Institute of Research and Public Policy Analysis [KIRPPA], 2024), substantial gaps in critical evidence persist, especially within the context of critical gender paradigms. This lack of comprehensive, nuanced yet context-sensitive data poses a significant challenge for policymakers, who require robust evidence to inform decisions and policy formulation. One particularly underexplored area is gender and political participation—a domain that continues to be marked by shallow analysis and reductionist thinking. The existing literature on gender and political participation (GPPL) is for the better part elitist, quantitatively driven, and fails to fully capture the complexities of gendered experiences within political spaces.

For instance, according to the World Economic Forum (2022), the gender gap in political participation in sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya, is closing at an alarmingly slow rate, with a projected timeline of over 102 years before gender parity in politics can be fully realized. This statistic is a clear indictment of the limitations of current gender policies and research, which focus predominantly on increasing the numerical representation of women in political spaces. While such efforts may be beneficial in some respects, they often neglect the deeper structural issues that influence women's actual participation in politics, particularly for those outside the elite circles. The push for greater female representation tends to emphasize the success stories of affluent women who are often well-connected to political elites, rather than addressing the broader barriers that prevent the majority of rural women from engaging meaningfully in political processes.

Indeed, the current gender scholarship, and by extension the gender mainstreaming programming in politics, is fixated on the numbers game—focusing on the quantity of women in political offices rather than the quality of their engagement. This approach risks oversimplifying the political dynamics and perpetuating a form of political participation that caters primarily to women from wealthy, urban backgrounds, often at the expense of rural women. In Kenya, for example, the women who manage to break into political spheres tend to be either exceptionally wealthy or connected to established political dynasties. Their political rise is frequently framed as a triumph for gender equality; however, this success is not representative of the experiences of the majority of Kenyan women (Neverlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy, 2015; Ogeto, 2016; Kabugi, 2016; Kamau, 2010). As Wambui (2016) points out, these women are often the exception rather than the rule, and their rise to power may come at the cost of perpetuating patriarchal structures rather than dismantling them.

Furthermore, while women's leadership is celebrated, critical studies suggest that women who acquire political offices often replicate the same patriarchal practices they once sought to challenge. These studies reveal a troubling pattern where women in leadership positions become embroiled in campaign gangsterism, corruption, cronyism, and voter bribery—behaviors typically associated with male-dominated political environments. This replication of male-dominated political practices raises questions about the true nature of "women's leadership" and whether it leads to genuine societal transformation or merely reinforces existing power structures (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011; Goetz, 2007; Wiesehomeier & Verge, 2020; Alexander & Bågenholm, 2018).

From this analysis, three key questions emerge: Is the current push to increase the number of women in politics a necessary but ultimately flawed initiative, and should it be reevaluated? Should the existing gender and politics scholarship be replaced, or can it be reconfigured to address the inherent limitations of the current capitalist model of gender mainstreaming in politics? There are, of course, compelling arguments for continuing with the current paradigm. Women, like men, have the right to equal participation in both private and public spheres, and affirmative action is crucial for addressing the historical marginalization of women in leadership positions. Furthermore, evidence suggests that women bring valuable perspectives to the political table, often raising issues of social justice, equity, and inclusivity (Domingo et al., 2015; Blumenau, 2021).

However, while these arguments are valid, they do not capture the full spectrum of political experiences across the entire population of women. The current scholarship, with its focus on elite women, does not account for the experiences of rural women—those who often face the greatest obstacles to political participation. The elitist, quantitative, and reductionist approach to gender and political participation must therefore be complemented (not replaced) by a more inclusive framework, one that acknowledges the diverse experiences of rural women, who play different roles in politics and experience political violence and exclusion in unique ways. These women, along with rural men, form the backbone (are the majority) of political engagement in Kenya, yet their voices are often sidelined in favor of an elite-driven agenda, in scholarship and praxis.

In this regard, it is essential to expand gender and political participation scholarship to include the voices of rural voters, especially women, and to reframe political engagement as a multidimensional, context-specific process. A more holistic approach to gender and politics would recognize the intersectional challenges faced by rural women—such as economic insecurity, limited access to education, and geographical isolation—and how these factors shape their political participation. Additionally, political violence, as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002), involves "the intentional use of power and force, threatened or actual, against a person, group, or community, that results in or is likely to result in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation." This conceptualization underscores the structural and personal nature of the violence rural women endure, particularly in digital spaces, where they are targeted with harassment, disinformation, and coercion. By situating these experiences within such a definition, the study highlights the urgency of addressing not only physical but also psychological and structural forms of violence that impede rural women's meaningful engagement in political processes. Through such reimagined frameworks, the current capitalist model of gender mainstreaming can be reoriented to foster grassroots political engagement and a more inclusive, equitable, and democratic political landscape for all.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

It is against this background that the present study undertakes an analysis of political violence in digital spaces through a gender lens. While there has been a substantial body of research on gender-based violence (GBV), the majority of this work has largely focused on non-political dimensions of violence, leaving a significant gap in the analysis of political gender-based violence (PGBV). In fact, many studies on PGBV tend to be enmeshed within the capitalist paradigm, focusing primarily on elite women candidates who are contesting political office. Such studies are often reductionist, centering their analysis on the experiences of women from elite backgrounds, who, despite their increased access to resources and power, represent a small minority of the broader female electorate (Faith, 2022; Kurasawa, Rondinelli, & Kilicaslan, 2023; Barter & Koulu, 2021; Ratnasari, Sumartias & Romli, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Puente et al., 2021; Ging, 2023). While this focus on elite women in politics may be valuable in certain contexts, it overlooks the far more prevalent, though often less visible, political violence faced by rural women—especially within the emerging digital spaces that

increasingly shape modern political campaigns.

In a parallel critique, mainstream gender and political participation literature often isolates itself from the nuanced realities of rural women's engagement in political processes. This oversight leaves rural women, who make up the majority of voters, invisible within the wider discourse on political participation. Rural women face a distinct set of barriers to engaging in political spaces—barriers which are compounded by geographical isolation, limited access to digital technologies, and entrenched socio-cultural norms. As political violence increasingly moves into the digital realm, rural voters, both men and women, are exposed to new forms of violence and harassment that are uniquely gendered. As these digital spaces—ranging from social media to messaging platforms—become key arenas for political engagement, the forms and impact of violence shift, with rural women particularly vulnerable to gendered attacks, disinformation, and exclusionary practices.

The dearth of studies specifically addressing PGBV within virtual spaces underscores a critical gap in current academic literature. While gendered violence in traditional political spaces is well-documented, virtual violence is often overlooked, leaving rural voters, particularly women, vulnerable and underrepresented in the scholarly narrative. This study aims to fill that gap by providing an analysis of the specific ways in which rural voters experience gendered political violence in digital spaces. By focusing on the experiences of rural voters, particularly rural women but also rural men, this research not only extends the scholarship on PGBV but also challenges the prevailing focus on elite political figures. The study seeks to bring rural perspectives to the forefront, highlighting the unique challenges these voters face in navigating digital political spaces that are increasingly hostile and exclusionary.

The study examines nine distinct categories of digital political violence commonly cited in the literature: social media harassment and intimidation; disinformation campaigns and character assassination; cyberstalking and surveillance; non-consensual sharing of private information (doxing); coercive use of messaging platforms; exclusion from digital campaign engagement; manipulative use of deepfakes and altered media; sexual harassment in virtual campaign spaces; and exploitation via mobile money scams (Barter & Koulu, 2021; Dunn, 2020; Adams, Lea, & D'Silva, 2021; Miner, 2022). These domains represent the growing intersection of political violence and digital technology, a convergence that demands urgent scholarly attention to better understand the gendered implications of digital violence in political campaigns.

Within the prism of the evidence merging from this study, the study posits that gender, particularly as it pertains to rural women voters, plays a pivotal role in shaping their experiences of political violence within digital spaces. By shifting the focus away from the elite and towards the rural electorate, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive, nuanced understanding of political violence and its gendered dimensions. This critical examination not only serves to inform policy interventions aimed at combating PGBV but also seeks to advance the theoretical framework of gender and politics by addressing the gaps in existing scholarship and offering new avenues for future research.

This study has six interrelated parts. The first, introduction, has highlighted the key concepts in the study and reviewed the trajectory of scholarship on the nexus of gender, political violence, and technology-facilitated violence. The second, theoretical framework, highlights the key concepts tying the study together. The third section presents the study methodology, the fourth section presents the findings, the fifth, presents the discussions and interpretations of the findings, while the sixth and final section presents the inferences that can be drawn from the research undertaken and presented in this paper.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs Taylor Hawk's Intersectional Feminism (IF), originally propounded by (Crenshaw, 1991) and improved by Hawk (2015) as its theoretical framework to analyze the gendered dimensions of rural women voters' experiences of political violence in digital spaces during electoral campaigns in Luo Nyanza counties. Intersectional Feminism (IF), as articulated by Taylor Hawk, emphasizes the interconnectedness of social identities—such as gender, class, and ethnicity—and the structural systems of oppression, including patriarchy, elitism, and institutional inequality, that shape lived experiences. The theory underscores the need to analyze how these intersections produce unique forms of marginalization and resilience within specific

contexts. In an African political context, IF emphasizes and therefore helps researchers to examine the intersections of gender with multiple social identities and systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, elitism, and political patronage, to explain the nuanced vulnerabilities of marginalized groups. While acknowledging these intersections, the study foregrounds gender as the primary lens, examining how structural factors like patriarchal norms, digital inequalities, and institutional gaps amplify women voters' susceptibility to political gender-based violence (PGBV) in digital campaigns.

The IF therefore provides the researchers with a framework to critique the dominance of elite-centric gender narratives that saturate existing literature, particularly those that emphasize the experiences of urban, affluent women in political participation. By contrast, this study centers the voices and lived realities of rural women, who constitute a majority in Kenya's political landscape but remain underrepresented in scholarly and policy discourses. IF provides a lens to deconstruct how patriarchal structures and gendered hierarchies manifest in both digital and offline spaces, perpetuating violence aimed at silencing and excluding rural women from meaningful political engagement.

The study extends IF, and examine how patriarchy operates through political violence in digital spaces, where women face harassment, threats, disinformation, and other coercive tactics designed to suppress their agency and participation. As the findings of the study show, these challenges are compounded by rural women's limited access to digital technologies, lower levels of digital literacy, and systemic exclusion from institutional safeguards. Digital platforms, while heralded as democratizing tools, often reinforce structural oppressions, turning virtual spaces into battlegrounds of gendered violence. The study uses IF to critically explore these dynamics, illustrating how digital inequalities intersect with socio-cultural norms to marginalize rural women further in electoral campaigns.

An important tenet of IF is the notion of resistance and agency which implies that usually the marginalized, in this case the majority minority women, often will attempt to resist oppression through a variety of mechanisms. The study examines to what extent rural women exhibit resilience and agency by developing coping mechanisms and resistance strategies, including forming digital and community-based networks to counter PGBV and amplify their voices. While these actions are expected in literature to demonstrate significant forms of empowerment, the study critiques whether such grassroots strategies exist in the first place, and secondly, whether they effectively translate into substantive representation or equitable inclusion in political decision-making processes. Through the application of IF, this study deepens the understanding of gendered political violence in digital spaces, providing a critical perspective on how to build inclusive and equitable political environments that genuinely reflect the experiences of rural women voters.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is an excerpt of an ongoing exploratory sequential mixed methods study which is undertaken across four counties of Luo Nyanza Kenya: Siaya, Kisumu, Homabay, and Migori, specifically in 16 Wards, 4 from each of the selected sub-counties from the four counties. The counties were selected purposively owing to the fact that they are dominated by people of Luo culture and the voters exhibit a trend characterized by voting pattern alone a dominant party, namely, since 2007, ODM. The sub-counties, and wards were randomly selected using a shuffle strategy. For example for the sub-counties, pieces of paper were cut and names of sub-counties in each selected county written on it, mixed thoroughly and poured down and the two from each group (counties) selected without bias.

This particular paper entails data from Siaya County, and therefore conclusions drawn may or may not reflect the state of the subject of focus of larger study, namely, the *dynamics of rural voters' participation in politics during campaigns*. Siaya County perfectly matches the characteristics of the targeted region as described above. In Siaya County, the study was done in Gem and Ugenya sub-counties; and in West Gem and Yalla Township Wards for the case of Gem sub-county, and Ukwalla East and Uholo East for the case of Ugenya sub-county. A special of the study was to go deeper into the rural villages rather than to do a rural study within townships which may influence our conclusions about the real experiences of the rural voter during the heated period of campaigns.

The utility of exploratory sequential mixed-methods design was much useful. As shown in the literature review/introduction, there is a dearth of research that examines the issue of gender parity in politics from a non-elite angle. The focus is therefore to increase the numbers of women in formal positions, a rather quantitative approach to gender parity in politics, as opposed to a quest to ask the difficult question on how the majority of women and their men counterparts get involves (roles), experience (outcomes) politics during the special times of campaigns. The greyness of this subject in gender and political participation literature necessitated an exploratory approach. As Creswell & Creswell (2018) assert, a sequential collection of data beginning with QUAL and then QUANT helped this study to refine concepts and revise the study tool. A missed methods approach help the researcher to both quantify and pursue nuance therefore undertaking narrative analysis, which helps meet the quest for a study of “dynamics” the complexities that neither numbers alone, nor texts alone could tell, but using both seamlessly did.

The QUANT data was collected using a Linkert Scale questionnaire and which gathered data on a scale of 1-5 asking responding how far they agreed with the statements provided. The questionnaire was administered to a total of 97 individual household heads from four Wards in Siaya. The QUANT sample is part of the larger sample for the said ongoing study which was statistically arrived at using Fisher et al. (1989) formula. The QUAL data was collected using 8 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with groups of rural voters mobilized using either area chiefs, or former politicians, a strategy which increased the chances of reaching to the target 4 men 4 women composition. It also aided in reducing expectations (financial) from the researcher except for drinks and reimbursements whenever need was realized. 24 Key Informant Interviews were also conducted at two levels, community and with policy cohort, including political parties leadership, IEBC officers, Office of Registrar of Political; Parties, Local Administration, among others.

To realize reliability and validity of the data collected, the study used a number of strategies. For QUANT the study questionnaire was pretested in Central Gem with a sample of 31 respondents allowing for necessary adjustments including adding new constructs. For the QUANT and QUAL the researcher: recruited and trained 2 assistants on the essence and intensions of the study and its tools. For QUAL continuous journaling, daily debriefs, concurrent analysis of QUAL as data comes in, and regular checks by supervisors were employed, ensured the research process was kept on track and needed data collected effectively and efficiently.

The QUAL is analyzed using Atlas.Ti Web which helped the researcher identify themes and sub-themes under which findings were organized for discussions, and then interpretations. In addition, the researcher experience came in handy to help undertake detailed and deep analysis of the QUAL dataset. The QUANT was analyzed using SPSS V.20. The data was cleaned, checked for missing values, and then analyzed using descriptive statistics. The data was presented in a triangulated fashion with the findings section 3 beginning with a highlight of the QUANT and the section 4 on discussions and interpretations triangulating both findings to narratively present findings and compare and contrast with extant scholarship and the theoretical framework.

The study was underpinned by ethical consideration that guide social science research of this nature. The researchers obtained approval from Maseno University School of Graduate Studies (SGS) and further applied and obtained an approval from National Commission on Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI). The study used two research assistants who were trained for two days on the objectives of the study as well as on critical ethical issues, such as culture and interviewing, consent form administration, and data management. The study questionnaire was closed through a Likert scaling methodology and were self-designed by the researchers following observations and critiques from extant research. The scale was validated by 6 experts, two of whom were supervisors of this research and are the co-authors. The advice of the experts were implemented and redundant questions removed. The conduct of a pre-test with a select rural voters further ensured the reliability and validity of the instrument was improved before the launch of the tool.

## FINDINGS

This section presents the quantitative findings of the study, to highlight the key trends, and which are discussed and interpreted through triangulation in the next section. The study investigated the extent to which gender affects rural voters', particularly rural women voters, experiences of political violence in various virtual spaces. The findings are based on survey responses to nine categories of virtual political violence, with

participants rating their level of agreement with the impact of gender. Below is a detailed analysis of each category, highlighting key trends, insights, and implications. The study findings are summed in table 1 below and narrated subsequently.

Table 1: Extent of Experience of Political Violence on 9 Different Grounds of Digital Campaigns and Violence.

<b>How far do you agree that gender affects rural voters', especially rural women voters, experience of political violence on the following virtual spaces?</b>						
<b>Digital Space for Political Violence</b>	<b>Strongly Agree(5)</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree(4)</b>	<b>Neutral (3)</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree(2)</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree(1)</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
C <sub>341</sub> Social media harassment and intimidation	30(31%)	12 (12%)	41 (42%)	6 (12%)	8 (8%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>342</sub> Disinformation Campaigns and Character Assassination	33(34%)	8(8%)	5(5%)	28(29%)	23(24%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>343</sub> Cyber stalking and Surveillance	23(24%)	11(11%)	20(21%)	25(26%)	18(19%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>344</sub> Non-consensual Sharing of Private Information (Doxing)	19(20%)	11(11%)	45(46%)	4(4%)	18(19%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>345</sub> Coercive Use of Messaging Platforms	7(7%)	17(18%)	41(42%)	12(12%)	20(21%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>346</sub> Exclusion from Digital Campaign Engagement	67(67%)	8(8%)	12(12%)	6(6%)	4 (4%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>347</sub> Manipulative Use of Deepfakes and Altered Media	5(5%)	10(5%)	45(46%)	20(21%)	17(18%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>348</sub> Sexual Harassment in Virtual Campaign Spaces	24(25%)	21(22%)	20(21%)	20(21%)	21(22%)	97 (100%)
C <sub>349</sub> Exploitation via Mobile Money Scams	27(28%)	15(15%)	23(24%)	28(29%)	4(4%)	97 (100%)

As evidence from the summary table 1 experiences of rural women with political violence on the digital spaces varies from category to category. As per the first category, a significant proportion of respondents strongly agreed (31%) and somewhat agreed (12%) that gender influences experiences of harassment and intimidation on social media platforms. However, the largest group remained neutral (42%), indicating varied perceptions or potential lack of awareness.

On the second category, a combined 42% of respondents (34% strongly agree and 8% somewhat agree) identified gender as a significant factor in disinformation campaigns. However, 29% somewhat disagreed, and 24% strongly disagreed.

Regarding cyberstalking and surveillance, 24% of the respondent's strongly agreed, and 11% somewhat agreed that gender plays a role in shaping these experiences. However, 26% somewhat disagreed, and 19% strongly disagreed, on the face value indicating a divided perception. A notable 21% were neutral, which again on the face value may suggest ambivalence or limited awareness of gender-specific dynamics in this category.

On the fourth category, 20% of respondents strongly agreed and 11% somewhat agreed that gender influences the experience of doxing in political contexts. A significant 46% were neutral, reflecting ambivalence or



limited recognition of this form of harassment, while 23% disagreed (19% strongly and 4% somewhat).

From the fifth category, only 7% of respondents strongly agreed, and 18% somewhat agreed that gender influences the coercive use of messaging platforms in political contexts. A significant 42% were neutral, suggesting ambivalence and/or a lack of awareness of how gender specifically shapes experiences with coercion in digital messaging. Additionally, 33% of respondents disagreed (12% somewhat and 21% strongly), indicating that a notable portion of the rural electorate does not perceive gender as an important factor in the coercion that occurs via digital messaging platforms.

On the sixth category, the survey reveals that 67% of respondents strongly agreed that gender influences exclusion from digital campaign engagement, while 8% somewhat agreed, 12% were neutral, 6% somewhat disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed. This shows that a significant majority of respondents (75%) feel that gender plays a key role in rural women's exclusion from digital spaces in political campaigns, either through direct or indirect barriers to engagement.

On the seventh category, the findings from this study reveal that 46% of respondents were neutral regarding the impact of deepfakes, with a considerable number (21%) somewhat disagreeing and 18% strongly disagreeing. However, 5% strongly agreed and 10% somewhat agreed that deepfakes and altered media have been used manipulative ways in political campaigns. While this suggests that deepfakes are not yet as widespread or recognized as other forms of digital violence in the rural contexts studied, the potential of this technology to affect rural women's political engagement is undeniable.

On to the eighth category, the survey results show a significant prevalence of sexual harassment in virtual campaign spaces. Specifically, 25% of respondents strongly agreed, and 22% somewhat agreed that sexual harassment occurred in virtual political spaces (C348 Sexual Harassment in Virtual Campaign Spaces). The overall result indicates that 47% of respondents recognized the occurrence of sexual harassment to some extent, which underscores the prominence of this issue in virtual spaces where rural women voters are engaged.

Lastly, a significant proportion 43% (strongly agreed - 28% and somewhat agreed -15%) that gender influences experiences of mobile money scams. Neutrality was also high (24%), while disagreement accounted for 33%.

## DISCUSSIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS

This section triangulate the two sets of data sets used in their study, QUAL and QUANT in order to do a discussion of the findings; examining divergence and convergence on respondent views, and making general and context specific inferences. The section also interprets the findings in the face of extant scholarship while highlighting potential or actual implications of the emerging findings. As already said the discussions and interpretations are based on survey responses to nine categories of virtual political violence, with participants rating their level of agreement with the impact of gender, which are discussed and interpreted through a triangulated narrative with the QUAL data. The presentation proceed thematically, with the virtual/technology enabled grounds of political violence being the themes.

### Social Media Harassment and Intimidation

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter among others, have increasingly become spaces where political discourse occurs, but they are also sites of gendered harassment and intimidation. A UN Women (2021) report highlights that women in political spaces are disproportionately targeted by gender-based abuse on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. The report underscores that women face threats of violence, derogatory comments, and sexually explicit messages, all of which are meant to silence their political voices. Similarly, a USAID (2020) study complements the UN Women study by noting that online harassment often escalates during election periods, with women in rural areas particularly vulnerable due to limited access to digital safety resources.

In contrast, the study findings show a significant neutral response (42%), which reflect that many rural voters,

especially women lack direct exposure to online harassment as well as a limited recognition of its severity. From an FGD undertaken in West Gem Ward, woman narrates that:

Many of us use *mulika mwizi*. It appears that this is good for us because those of us who are on social media, as you can hear from this discussion, face social media harassment of higher magnitudes (FGD participant, West Gem Ward, 17<sup>th</sup> Nov 2024).

This confirms a lack of exposure to the majority who might suggest neutral responses, therefore this does not justify a lack of experience on this ground as nearly all women with smartphones experience it because they are on these platforms. This revelation is critical because it contrasts with the literature that emphasizes the ubiquity of such harassment for women in politics. The quantitatively oriented elitist research of gender and political participation, therefore does not capture the full range of experiences, as the focus on the elite woman, only reveals the experiences of those with smart phones and engaged on formal platforms of digital politics, thus excluding rural voters, especially women who even lack the minimum resources to buy smartphones. Krook & Sanín (2020) argue that online violence against women is not merely a byproduct of digitalization but a deliberate strategy to exclude them from public and political life. This finding though undertaken from an elitist paradigm, should be applicable to rural women (and men) as well.

While these findings align with intersectional feminist theory on digital violence, political violence and gender as the theory posit that patriarchal norms manifest in virtual spaces, replicating offline gender inequalities. However, the relatively high neutral responses also indicates cultural and social differences, as rural voters may normalize or downplay online harassment due to limited exposure to global gender discourses. One empowered women politician asserted, in this regard, thus:

Many rural women are unaware of the global gender discourses on digital violence. Therefore, like the issue of domestic violence which they don't report, similarly, they don't consider social media harassment as a serious issue to report to the relevant authorities (Former MCA – Siaya County Assembly, 21<sup>st</sup> Nov 2024).

To sum this theme, the study's convergence with extant literature confirms that social media harassment is a significant barrier to women's political participation. However, the study's unique contribution is the neutrality observed among rural respondents, which suggests an urgent need for education and awareness campaigns tailored to rural contexts. Programs like those advocated by UNESCO (2022), which focus on digital literacy and safety for rural women, are essential but should be tailor-made to be sensitive to political contexts in rural areas in order to empower these communities to recognize and combat online harassment effectively.

### **Disinformation Campaigns and Character Assassination**

Conventional literature suggests that disinformation campaigns disproportionately target women, particularly those in political or leadership positions. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2021) report notes that women are frequently subjected to false narratives that exploit gender stereotypes, aiming to delegitimize their political competence or personal character. Similarly, Amnesty International (2020) identifies disinformation as a deliberate tactic to suppress women's political participation, often through smear campaigns that question their morality or portray them as unfit for leadership.

In the rural context, the study findings align partially with these observations but also introduce contrasting perspectives. The significant disagreement (53% combined) suggests both a lack of awareness and differing experiences among rural voters regarding gender-specific disinformation. Interviews revealed that most rural players, especially women, do not understand what disinformation is, are only seated waiting for their educated husbands or kids or even relatives to give them political directions. This, unfortunately, even applies to the few with smart phones. One respondents argued:

There is a lot of information online. One cannot what is right and what is wrong and we have no capacity at all to know the truth. Usually we just pick up things like memes and ongoing discussions without any critical take. Am sure in many ways were might have been victims of these but we don't know (Key Informant, Ukwalla East Ward, 23<sup>rd</sup> Nov 2024).

This revelation is critical read in tandem with Chadha & Steiner (2021) who propose, in addition to our finding, that rural communities, with limited exposure to diverse media, may not fully recognize disinformation as a systematic gendered tool, instead perceiving it as a general political strategy. It occurs in this study, however, that most women in the rural areas, are not like the elite women of Chadha & Steiner (2021), for they are not aware of what disinformation is in the first place, before they can be complacent with it. This further shows that the dynamics of experience of political violence under this category is very different when it happens to elite women especially those contesting for political positions, or are informed partakers of digital politics.

Theoretically, disinformation campaigns align with intersectional feminism. As the study shows, women, knowingly or unknowingly are targeted more viciously due to societal biases that reinforce traditional roles. At the same time, the polarized responses in this study suggest that while some respondents recognize gendered dimensions, others many do not recognize these, because largely due to lack of awareness and the absence on the digital platforms from which such experiences are executed.

### **Cyberstalking and Surveillance**

Extant perspectives in scholarship assert that cyberstalking and surveillance disproportionately target women in political contexts, with perpetrators exploiting digital tools to intimidate and monitor their activities. According to UN Women (2021), cyberstalking often escalates during election campaigns, with politically active women facing heightened threats as part of broader efforts to deter their participation. The World Wide Web Foundation (2020) further highlights how surveillance technologies are weaponized to compromise women's privacy, amplify psychological pressure, and undermine their political agency.

However, these conventional knowledge appear to be giving an elite narrative and leave out experiences from a rural political actor perspective. The study's findings, particularly the high percentage of disagreement (45% combined), suggest that rural voters may perceive cyberstalking and surveillance differently. Fischer & McCullough (2019) tend to agree with our finding when they argue that rural populations often lack the technological exposure to recognize or understand the nuances of surveillance and its gendered dimensions. When asked what cyber stalking is during interviews, almost the same percentage as those who disagreed (43%) gave statements which showed a lack of understanding of this concept. Therefore confirming the assertion by Fischer & McCullough (2019) but also explaining the quantitative results. Nonetheless, the findings align with the intersectional feminist digital surveillance theories, which posit that gendered power imbalances are replicated in virtual spaces through practices like stalking and surveillance. However, the ambivalence and disagreement in the responses suggest that rural communities have limited frameworks for identifying and articulating these experiences.

### **Non-Consensual Sharing of Private Information (Doxing)**

Doxing, defined as the non-consensual disclosure of personal information online to intimidate or harm (CIMA, 2020), disproportionately targets women, particularly those in public and political spaces. According to UNESCO (2021) doxing is a key tactic in online gender-based violence, aimed at silencing women through exposure to both physical and psychological threats. Similarly, the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA, 2020) highlights how politically active women are doxed to undermine their credibility, discourage participation, and expose them to coordinated attacks. This study targeted women out of office and public spaces, but are from rural areas and involve themselves in politics through different ways.

The study's findings differ from this global perspective, with a significant (46%) proportion of rural respondents remaining neutral when asked to rank their agreement with the question on gender as impacting rural voters' receipt of doxing as measure of political violence. The study findings, especially the qualitative interviews confirm Markham & Graham (2020) suggestion that rural populations may lack familiarity with the term "doxing" or its implications, particularly if their experiences with digital platforms are limited. Additionally, rural cultural norms may downplay privacy concerns, making individuals less likely to identify doxing as a significant issue. Nonetheless, doxing remains a key issue as about 31% still agree that it influenced by gender with female voters being the greatest recipient of it.

While these findings align with intersectional **feminist theories** which emphasize that gendered power dynamics manifest in virtual spaces through tactics like doxing, the high neutrality in the study indicates a gap in awareness and understanding of this specific form of violence among rural voters.

### **Coercive Use of Messaging Platforms**

The coercive use of messaging platforms is a form of digital violence where perpetrators use messaging apps to harass, intimidate, or manipulate individuals, often to silence or control political actors. UN Women (2020) documents that women, particularly those active in political campaigns, are frequently targeted through these platforms with messages designed to intimidate or control their behavior. This often involves both direct threats and attempts to undermine women's credibility and influence. Similarly, Oxfam (2021) highlights how coercive messaging tactics, including the manipulation of private conversations or the strategic flooding of messaging apps with threatening or abusive content, are used to suppress women's voices, especially during politically sensitive periods such as election campaigns.

The relatively low levels of agreement in the study (7% strongly agree and 18% somewhat agree) compared to the high number of neutral responses (42%) and those who disagreed (33%) indicate a potential gap in recognition of this form of abuse, especially in rural contexts, which helps to give a new perspective to the elite paradigm of genderbased violence in politics. Fischer and McCullough (2019) suggest that rural populations, particularly in areas where digital infrastructure and literacy may be limited, are less likely to recognize and articulate experiences of coercion in digital spaces. This could explain why a large portion of the respondents did not perceive gender as a central factor in coercive messaging.

Furthermore, Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that digital platforms often serve as spaces of both empowerment and exploitation, with powerful actors using them to target vulnerable groups. In contexts where women are already marginalized, the use of messaging platforms for coercion becomes a tool of reinforcement of these gendered power dynamics. Chaudhry (2020) also asserts that political coercion via messaging can disproportionately target women, as they often face double pressures: as political actors and as women, which makes them more vulnerable to both online and offline forms of manipulation.

The findings present a contrast to feminist theories that assert the centrality of gender in digital violence. Feminist scholars such as Cahill (2018) have emphasized that digital platforms are not neutral spaces but are shaped by preexisting social power structures. Women, particularly those who deviate from traditional roles, often face targeted harassment and coercion aimed at silencing their participation in public or political spheres. However, the disagreement and neutrality seen in the findings suggest that rural communities may not be as attuned to the gendered dynamics of coercion in messaging, possibly due to limited exposure to such experiences and as a result lack of technical literacy to understand the nuances of digital harassment.

### **Exclusion from Digital Campaign Engagement**

The exclusion of rural women from digital political engagement remains a critical barrier to their full participation in electoral processes. The findings of this study indicate that 67% of respondents strongly agree that women in rural areas face significant exclusion from digital campaign spaces, reflecting a prominent challenge to their engagement in political processes. This exclusion, perceived by women as arising from their limited access to social media platforms and digital resources, underscores the gendered dynamics in digital spaces. Exclusion from digital campaign engagement primarily affects women's capacity to participate in political discourse, advocacy, and decision-making, further entrenching gender inequality in political spaces.

Research has consistently highlighted the digital divide as a key barrier to political participation among rural women, particularly in contexts where political campaigns are increasingly mediated through digital platforms. For instance, a report by UN Women (2020) emphasizes that women, especially in rural areas, are often systematically excluded from digital spaces due to structural barriers such as limited access to technology, lack of digital literacy, and patriarchal norms that restrict women's public engagement. This exclusion is not only a result of the technological divide but also reflects deeper socio-political barriers that prevent women from leveraging digital platforms to influence political outcomes. Huyer (2020) further argues that women in rural

areas face intersecting forms of marginalization, where digital exclusion intersects with gendered social norms that prioritize men's political roles over women's.

The exclusion from digital platforms is compounded by gendered stereotypes that limit women's visibility in online political spaces. USAID (2021) highlights that, in many rural regions, digital platforms are seen as male-dominated spaces, where women's voices are often overshadowed by their male counterparts. The research shows that political parties and candidates tend to engage more with male voters, neglecting to create inclusive digital campaigns that reach out to women, particularly in rural communities. Moreover, the lack of targeted digital literacy programs for women in these areas further exacerbates the problem, leaving rural women underrepresented and marginalized in digital political engagements.

The exclusion of rural women from digital political campaigns also reflects the intersectionality of gender, location, and socio-economic status. The concept of intersectionality, as discussed by Crenshaw (1991), is critical in understanding how overlapping forms of discrimination (such as gender, class, and geography and many more, disability, education level, employment status, closeness to a politician) compound the exclusionary practices faced by rural women. Our study reveals that women in these communities not only lack access to digital platforms but are also often subjected to additional barriers such as illiteracy, poverty, and patriarchal norms that restrict their movement and expression. This creates a unique set of challenges for rural women, who are further marginalized in political processes that increasingly rely on digital tools and social media for campaign engagement.

Gurumurthy (2020) points out that rural women are disproportionately affected by the digital gender gap, which hinders their ability to engage in political campaigns that are increasingly conducted through social media and other digital platforms. This gap is particularly noticeable in the Global South, especially in rural areas such as Siaya County where this study was undertaken where infrastructure issues, combined with cultural and economic barriers, contribute to lower rates of digital engagement among women. Consequently, the study establishes that majority of rural women are excluded from key political discussions, making it difficult for them to voice their concerns, engage with political candidates, or mobilize support for political causes.

Improving digital literacy is crucial to addressing the exclusion of rural women from digital political engagement. Heeks (2020) emphasizes that women who are digitally literate are more likely to use digital platforms to engage in political activities, including campaign mobilization, voting, and general political discourse. However, without the necessary skills or access to technology, rural women are systematically excluded from these opportunities. Efforts to enhance digital literacy among rural women must be a priority for both governments and political organizations aiming to create inclusive political environments. According to UN Women (2020), increasing women's access to mobile technology and internet services is one way to bridge the digital gender divide and empower rural women to participate, and this obviously will include political campaigns. Further, when comparing the findings from this study with similar research, the patterns of digital exclusion faced by rural women in this study align with broader global trends. World Economic Forum (2021) reports similar challenges in other regions, noting that women in rural areas are less likely to own smartphones, have internet access, or possess the skills required to navigate digital platforms effectively. These factors severely limit their participation in political processes, especially in campaigns where social media and online communication are key.

### **Manipulative Use of Deepfakes and Altered Media**

Deepfakes—videos or images that have been manipulated using artificial intelligence to create realistic but fake depictions—have emerged as a powerful tool in political campaigns. Wagner & Roesner (2020) argue that deepfake technology, while still in its early stages in some regions, has the potential to undermine political discourse by spreading misinformation and manipulating public opinion. This technology is particularly dangerous for rural women, who are already marginalized in political spaces and whose voices can be easily silenced or distorted through such manipulations. Chesney and Citron (2019) emphasize that deepfakes can be used to discredit women politicians by fabricating evidence of immoral behavior or dishonesty, thus

reinforcing gender stereotypes and political exclusion.

In rural areas, where access to information is often limited and traditional media platforms are the primary sources of political knowledge, the impact of deepfakes can be even more profound. USAID (2020) notes that rural communities are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and media manipulation, as they may not have the digital literacy or access to alternative media to critically evaluate digital content. According to our study, rural women, in particular, face compounded challenges, as their engagement in political campaigns is already hindered by factors such as illiteracy, limited access to technology, and socio-cultural barriers that discourage them from speaking out. The use of deepfakes in these contexts can exacerbate these challenges, further marginalizing rural women and distorting their political voices.

The use of altered media to target women voters is particularly gendered. Rossi (2021) argues that political actors often use manipulated media content to undermine women candidates by portraying them in an unfavorable light. This practice can take many forms, from altering images to creating fabricated videos that attribute false behaviors or ideologies to female candidates. This not only harms the public perception of women in politics but also discourages other women from participating in political campaigns. UN Women (2020) also highlights how this manipulation is often gendered, as women are disproportionately affected by digitally fabricated narratives that seek to discredit their character, silence their voices, or cast doubt on their leadership capabilities.

In the context of rural women, the gendered manipulation of media can be particularly damaging. Binns (2021) notes that rural women are already less likely to engage in political discourse due to socio-cultural barriers. When deepfakes and other manipulated media are used to target them, it becomes even more difficult for rural women to establish credibility and advocate for their rights. The manipulation of their images or voices in the digital sphere further alienates them from political processes, thereby deepening gender inequalities in political participation.

The findings of this study regarding the manipulative use of deepfakes align with broader trends in global politics. Hutchings (2021) underscores that while deepfakes have been extensively used in countries with more advanced technological infrastructures, their use in political campaigns in developing countries is still emerging. However, in contexts such as Sudan or other politically volatile regions, Aoki (2020) suggests that deepfakes could be weaponized to serve political agendas by creating false narratives that manipulate public perception, particularly regarding women's roles in politics. This literature is consistent with the findings of this study, which shows that rural women may not yet be fully aware of or affected by deepfake manipulation, but the potential for harm is significant.

In contrast to the emerging nature of deepfake technology in rural settings, the widespread use of manipulated media to attack women's credibility and character is well-documented. Hampton and Alper (2020) discuss how manipulated media, including both deepfakes and doctored images, is used to reinforce existing gender stereotypes and power imbalances. This mirrors the experiences of rural women who, as this study suggests, may be more likely to be subjected to media manipulation that undermines their political participation.

While rural women may not be as immediately impacted by deepfake videos as urban women or those in more developed digital environments, the risks of such technology in political campaigns remain a pressing concern. As rural communities become more digitally connected, UNESCO (2021) warns that the unchecked spread of manipulated media may begin to affect the political engagement of rural women more directly.

### **Sexual Harassment in Virtual Campaign Spaces**

Sexual harassment in virtual spaces is an increasingly pertinent issue, especially in digital political spaces, where rural women voters often face targeted abuse and violence. My findings reflect how gender plays a significant role in the experience of harassment, particularly in the context of virtual campaign spaces. The data collected indicates that virtual sexual harassment is a widespread and severe issue, with notable gendered patterns. This section will analyze the findings on sexual harassment in virtual spaces, comparing them with existing scholarly research and authoritative reports.

This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the gendered nature of online harassment. In particular, rural women often face specific vulnerabilities, as they may be less equipped with digital literacy skills or access to protective mechanisms in virtual spaces. The survey indicates that women in rural areas experience harassment more intensely, as evidenced by high levels of agreement (67%) on exclusion from digital campaign engagement (C346), which is closely linked to gendered harassment. Such exclusion often serves as a form of violence that restricts women's participation in political discourse, a theme explored in earlier studies on the intersection of digital spaces and gender-based violence (Binns & Binns, 2022).

Another concerning finding from the study was the substantial experience of "Coercive Use of Messaging Platforms," with 42% of respondents indicating some level of agreement that they were targeted through manipulative messages (C345). This reflects the broader issue of coercive control in digital spaces, where perpetrators exploit private communication channels to harass and intimidate women, a finding supported by literature on digital harassment (Chaudhary & Tiwari, 2021).

The findings on sexual harassment in virtual spaces are in line with several established studies that document the gendered nature of online abuse. For instance, research by the European Commission (2023) highlights that women, particularly those from marginalized communities, are more likely to face sexualized online violence, including harassment and stalking. This is reflected in my findings, where sexual harassment in virtual political spaces was identified as a frequent problem for rural women voters.

Furthermore, studies by Leung & Duffy (2020) have shown that online harassment often intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as racism and homophobia, amplifying the negative impacts on women from marginalized backgrounds. My study supports this argument, particularly when considering the experience of sexual harassment alongside other forms of digital violence, such as doxing (C344) and disinformation campaigns (C342). The experience of harassment becomes compounded for rural women who may also be subjected to multiple layers of abuse, both related to their gender and their socio-political identity.

The high rates of coercive use of messaging platforms (C345) also align with findings from Access Now (2022), which discussed the manipulative use of messaging in the form of threats and intimidation. Access Now emphasizes that these tactics are particularly common during political campaigns, where adversaries use private messaging to target political candidates, particularly women. This form of harassment often goes unchecked, contributing to an unsafe environment for women to participate in digital politics (United Nations, 2023).

The findings from the study underscore the urgent need for stronger digital governance and policies to prevent sexual harassment in virtual political spaces. Given the significant percentage of respondents who agreed that digital spaces were used for harassment and intimidation, platforms must implement stricter safeguards to protect users from genderbased violence. The study supports the recommendations from the European Commission (2023) for greater accountability from platform providers, such as improving reporting systems and ensuring timely responses to harassment claims.

Additionally, the issue of exclusion from digital political engagement, with 67% of respondents acknowledging its prevalence, calls for policies aimed at increasing the representation of rural women in digital spaces. As highlighted by Chaudhary & Tiwari (2021), platforms must foster inclusivity through proactive interventions, such as targeted outreach and education to help rural women navigate the digital political landscape without fear of harassment.

### **Exploitation via Mobile Money Scams**

Mobile money systems have become an integral part of the financial landscape in many African countries, providing rural populations with access to financial services that were previously unavailable. However, mobile money platforms have also become a breeding ground for exploitation, particularly for rural women who may be more vulnerable to scams and fraud in digital spaces. The study's findings on mobile money scams indicate that 28% of respondents strongly agreed, and 15% somewhat agreed, that mobile money scams disproportionately target rural voters, especially women. The exploitation of rural women through such scams

presents a critical issue that affects their political participation, financial autonomy, and trust in digital platforms.

Mobile money systems, such as M-Pesa in Kenya, have revolutionized financial transactions for millions of people, particularly in rural areas. However, Pereira et al. (2020) highlight that the rapid expansion of mobile money has also brought about new forms of exploitation. Rural women, who are often excluded from formal banking systems, are particularly vulnerable to fraud and scams conducted through these platforms. Scammers may impersonate political figures, campaign teams, or financial institutions, offering fake political rewards or financial assistance in exchange for sensitive information such as phone numbers, PINs, or even direct payments. Nwogwugwu and Okojie (2021) argue that women in rural areas, especially those with low levels of digital literacy, are more likely to fall victim to such scams due to a lack of understanding of mobile money security measures and the general unregulated nature of the digital finance sector.

The study findings, where 28% of rural voters strongly agreed that mobile money scams targeted them, align with UN Women's (2020) report on digital finance and women's vulnerability in Africa. According to the UN, rural women's engagement with mobile money platforms often exposes them to greater risks of fraud due to their limited access to digital literacy programs. In many cases, these women are unaware of the various tactics scammers use, which can include fake investment schemes, phony offers of loans, or even fraudulent political campaign contributions. Makenzi & Patel (2020) note that the consequences of such scams are particularly severe for rural women, as they may lose money they cannot afford to spare, exacerbating their already limited financial security and reinforcing gender inequalities in political and economic participation.

The exploitation of rural women through mobile money scams is not just a matter of financial fraud; it also has significant gendered implications for political participation. Chirau et al. (2020) note that mobile money systems, while empowering rural women by providing them with a means of financial independence, can also become tools for reinforcing patriarchal structures. In a gendered context, rural women who fall victim to scams may face social stigma, as their financial independence is undermined, and they may be further marginalized from political participation due to the economic consequences of such exploitation. Moreover, the financial losses incurred through scams may reduce rural women's capacity to participate in political campaigns, whether through donating to candidates, mobilizing others, or engaging in digital political discourse.

USAID (2021) echoes this concern, noting that the economic vulnerability of rural women to digital fraud increases their political exclusion. In rural areas, women often rely on mobile money platforms for essential financial transactions, such as paying school fees or supporting their families. When these women fall victim to mobile money scams, they experience not only financial losses but also a diminished sense of agency and autonomy. Sinnathamby (2019) further asserts that the exploitation of women through mobile money scams can contribute to broader political disengagement, as victims are likely to lose trust in both the platforms and the political processes associated with them, resulting in reduced political participation.

The findings of this study regarding the exploitation of rural women through mobile money scams are consistent with literature on the challenges of digital financial inclusion in Africa. Nwogwugwu and Okojie (2021) discuss how the rise of mobile money services in Africa has disproportionately impacted women in rural areas, many of whom are not adequately equipped to handle the security risks associated with these services. Similarly, UN Women (2020) emphasizes that rural women are more vulnerable to digital financial fraud due to a combination of factors, including low levels of digital literacy, lack of access to formal banking services, and deep-seated gender inequalities that limit their financial autonomy.

Moreover, the exploitation of women via mobile money scams is also a reflection of broader trends in digital inequality. Wright and Houghton (2020) argue that mobile technology, which is often seen as a tool for empowering marginalized groups, can inadvertently perpetuate existing inequalities when not accompanied by adequate support structures, such as digital literacy programs and gender-sensitive financial education. These findings resonate with the study's conclusion that rural women's political and financial engagement through mobile platforms is often undermined by the exploitative practices of scammers.



## CONCLUSIONS

This study critically addresses a significant gap in research on political gender-based violence (PGBV) in digital spaces by centering the lived experiences of rural women voters—a group often neglected in elitist, urban-centric scholarship. While existing literature highlights the gendered impact of online violence, it largely reflects the experiences of elite, politically empowered women, leaving the realities of rural women unexamined. By adopting an Intersectional Feminist lens, this study shifts the focus to the intersection of gender, geography, and socio-economic status, revealing the compounded vulnerabilities of rural women in digital political spaces.

The findings challenge the notion of resilience and resistance commonly associated with marginalized groups in Intersectional Feminism. Contrary to expectations, rural women in Luo Nyanza counties exhibit neither widespread awareness of PGBV nor the capacity to develop resistance strategies. Many women fail to recognize online abuses, including harassment, doxing, and cyberstalking, as illegal or as manifestations of gendered political violence. This lack of understanding, coupled with limited digital literacy and access to technology, entrenches their marginalization and leaves them ill-equipped to navigate or counteract the growing threats of digital political violence.

Moreover, structural barriers such as patriarchal norms, socio-cultural stigma, and insufficient institutional support further constrain rural women's ability to resist digital PGBV or advocate for their rights in political spaces. The absence of community-based networks or grassroots mobilization underscores the systemic exclusion of these women, who remain on the periphery of both online and offline political engagement. Emerging threats like deepfakes and mobile money scams exacerbate their vulnerabilities, transforming digital platforms into tools of suppression rather than empowerment.

The study critiques existing frameworks that presume marginalized women will inherently develop strategies of resistance or empowerment. Instead, the findings reveal that such assumptions overlook the deeply entrenched structural inequalities that inhibit the agency of rural women. This insight calls for a fundamental rethinking of the discourse on resistance and resilience in Intersectional Feminism.

To address these gaps, the study advocates for targeted, grassroots interventions to empower rural women in digital political spaces. These include gender-sensitive digital literacy programs, awareness campaigns to demystify political gender-based violence, and robust policy frameworks designed to protect and amplify the voices of rural women. Importantly, these interventions must be informed by the lived realities of rural women to ensure they are context-specific and inclusive.

Ultimately, this study not only broadens the scope of understanding digital PGBV but also challenges structural elitism in existing research paradigms. It emphasizes the importance of positioning rural women as active stakeholders in the fight against political violence, shifting the narrative from one of victimhood to one of potential empowerment. By elevating the experiences of rural women, the findings challenge policymakers, activists, and scholars to rethink strategies for fostering equitable and inclusive democratic processes in an increasingly digitized political landscape.

### Areas for Further Research

1. *Gendered Dimensions of Digital Political Violence.* Investigate the nuanced ways in which gender shapes the experiences of online political violence, particularly in rural settings.
2. *Effectiveness of Digital Literacy Programs.* Examine the impact of gender-sensitive digital literacy initiatives on reducing online political violence among rural women voters.
3. *Intersectionality and Vulnerability.* Explore how intersecting factors like socio-economic status, education level, and geographic location influence rural women's exposure to and experiences of digital violence.
4. *Global vs. Local Perceptions of Digital Violence.* Study the disparities between global and rural

understandings of digital violence, focusing on bridging these gaps through context-specific strategies.

5. *Regulatory and Platform Accountability.* Analyze the role of international and national frameworks in holding platforms accountable for digital violence, and identify best practices for protecting women's rights in virtual political spaces.

## KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *Bridge the Digital Violence Awareness Gap.* Develop programs to align rural and global understandings of digital violence. Equip rural women with tools to recognize and resist online political intimidation.
2. *Combat Disinformation with Gender-Sensitive Approaches.* Design digital literacy campaigns that focus on identifying and challenging disinformation, with an emphasis on empowering women to counter false narratives.
3. *Promote Digital Safety Education.* Launch grassroots programs focused on cyberstalking awareness and response, emphasizing the development of gender-sensitive digital policies to protect women's political engagement.
4. *Address Doxing Through Tailored Interventions.* Implement digital literacy initiatives in rural areas, complemented by robust data privacy regulations and enforcement mechanisms to mitigate doxing risks.
5. *Expand Digital Literacy Programs to Tackle Coercive Messaging.* Increase awareness of coercive online behaviors among rural women through comprehensive education and advocacy. Develop legislative frameworks and safe reporting mechanisms to address digital coercion effectively.
6. *Strengthen International Regulatory Frameworks.* Advocate for global standards requiring platforms to address digital violence in political contexts, ensuring adherence to human rights standards that protect against violence and coercion.
7. *Empower Rural Women in Political Digital Spaces.* Invest in legal and educational interventions that address gendered dimensions of exclusion, harassment, and manipulative technologies like deepfakes, fostering safe online participation.

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## Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest of whatsoever sorts throughout the conceptualization, data collection, analysis and writing of this manuscript.

## Author Contributions

Each of the authors played significant roles in the study. Mr. Kasera, the lead researcher by virtue of being the postgraduate student and doing this study as part of his thesis research, collected the data, wrote up the first draft and made incorporated the comments from the supervisors. Drs. Barack and Phanice supervised the fieldwork, reviewed the data, and made comments on the first draft of the article, leading to its revision along some very important lines.

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