

Landscape Assessment of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence as an Attack on Women's Public Participation in Kenya: Incidence, Opportunities, and Recommendations

Transform Digital Spaces (Transform) Activity

Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) is a global threat to the health, safety, and political and economic wellbeing—not just of those who experience it, but of society as a whole. Transform is a three-year global initiative which supports the piloting of practical approaches to prevent, mitigate, and respond to TFGBV, with a focus on addressing violence experienced by women in politics and public life. In 2023, Transform worked on a foundational assessment of the state of TFGBV in Kenya.

This country-based assessment focused on six domains:

1. TFGBV against women in politics and public life, including incidence, trends, perpetrators, and common characteristics.
2. Women's political and civic participation.
3. Violence against women in politics.
4. Women's digital participation and civic tech.
5. Opportunities and barriers to accountability.
6. Broader contextual factors, including international and conflict factors.

TFGBV in Kenya exists at an intersection of multiple issues, including violence in the aftermath of the 2007-2008 election, terrorism, and regional, economic, and resource instability. There was a noticeable uptick in TFGBV against women political candidates during the general election in 2022. Observers noted an upsurge in bloggers disseminating false information and engaging in hate speech directed towards political competitors, as well as online violence encompassing sexual harassment, offensive name-calling, and stalking. Attacks on women political candidates are often coordinated, as public figures often face harassment from numerous fake accounts.

Key Findings:

1. **Data shows that TFGBV against female political aspirants in 2022 was high.** According to a 2022 report by Pollicy, over half of women candidates experienced TFGBV targeting their Facebook accounts, compared with about one-third of men, based on analysis of 134 Facebook accounts of political candidates¹. Losing candidates faced more violence than winners, and the more frequently women candidates used their accounts, the more likely they were to be targeted with violence.
2. **Common TFGBV tactics target specific subsets of women in politics and public life.** TFGBV targets women based on their multiple identities, including age (both younger and older women are dismissed), disability status, and religious status. Women candidates are attacked by men opponents with slurs and narratives from their own ethnic communities, and women from rural ethnic communities are highly targeted and face difficulty in addressing TFGBV.
3. **Kenyan laws regarding cybercrime, data protection, and sexual offenses are generally strong, although some gaps remain.** Women are often not aware of the channels available for reporting online violence, and face barriers trying to access them. Organizations providing legal support are overwhelmed, and women who go to the police find them unaware of how or unwilling to help, including telling candidates to just leave social media to avoid being targeted.
4. **Digital spaces are significant forums for Kenyan politics – and platform responses do little to address TFGBV.** More than one-third of Kenyans use social media, making digital spaces important political arenas. TFGBV is coordinated in closed channels, including manipulating images before disseminating them publicly. Platform-based policies and processes are ineffective and have led to women politicians having their own accounts suspended.
5. **Common tactics include sexualizing women and casting women as immoral to enforce the view of politics as a space exclusively for men.** Cyberbullying is highly sexualized and often includes body shaming. Women politicians are often cast as immoral, with fabricated stories and fake sex tapes spread online. Women politicians are also attacked for their marital status and personal lives and accused of being prostitutes and trading sexual favors for their political advancement.
6. **TFGBV is perpetrated by political rivals through paid influencers and political parties do not hold their own members accountable.** Perpetrators of online violence against women politicians are often political rivals, devoting resources to online campaigning and using tactics such as sexualized attacks, including fabricated images and stories. Political parties do not hold their own members accountable for these unethical – and sometimes illegal – activities.



Based on these findings, Transform identified several implications for the design and implementation of initiatives and programs working to address TFGBV in Kenya. Throughout all these next steps, **trauma-informed approaches and psychosocial support** should be incorporated in all activities related to TFGBV.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The National Computer and Cybercrime Coordination Committee (NC4) plays a crucial role in coordinating efforts related to identifying, investigating, and prosecuting cybercrimes. Entities such as NC4 and the Intergovernmental Budget and Economic Council (IBEC) may be also able to foster closer collaboration with social media platforms and other stakeholders in media and civil society. This collaboration can enhance the capacity of social media platforms' content moderation tools and promote transparency to facilitate oversight.

Recommendations:

- 1. Counter disparaging attitudes and behaviors:** by working with educational institutions and conducting campaigns, encouraging journalists and media to tell stories of women who have survived TFGBV, and building awareness among political parties about the harms of TFGBV.
- 2. Build capacity and awareness:** by cultivating synergies to connect implementors (both local and international) with local organizations, convening deep dive discussions and engagement sessions with local stakeholders, and working in the counties rather than just major cities.
- 3. Work with law enforcement and government:** by facilitating CSO engagement with law enforcement and with government institutions.
- 4. Engage in tech solutions:** by bringing civic tech into the conversation around TFGBV and developing lexicons and tools to track TFGBV in languages outside English.
- 5. Conduct research and awareness raising campaigns:** by exploring intersectional risks faced by women in politics and public life, especially from marginalized communities, and allocate funding for organizations strengthening awareness and enforcement of legal protections.

To request the full assessment, please reach out to info.transform@irex.org

Transform is an Associate Award (AA) carried out under the Civil Society and Media-Strengthened Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) Leader with Associates Award (LWA). It is implemented by the CSM-STAND consortium, with Pact as the holder of the leader award and recipient of the AA, and IREX as implementing lead. CSM-STAND is a five-year, USAID funded award that aims to foster independent civic forces; enhance civic engagement; and build vibrant, resilient, and self-reliant civil society and media sectors that cultivate more pluralistic, democratic societies.