SitRep

Gendered political attacks in Kenya's digital spaces

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Situation Report

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1. Introduction

The 2010 constitution's two-thirds gender principle, which mandates greater female political representation, has increased the number of women elected to public office in Kenya. According to a report by the National Democratic Institute and the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya, the country's decision to sign various international agreements on women's representation has prompted the adoption of domestic laws and reforms promoting women's participation in politics. The report states that these measures have led to increased representation of women across all levels of government and have, in turn, enhanced their influence in decision-making processes.
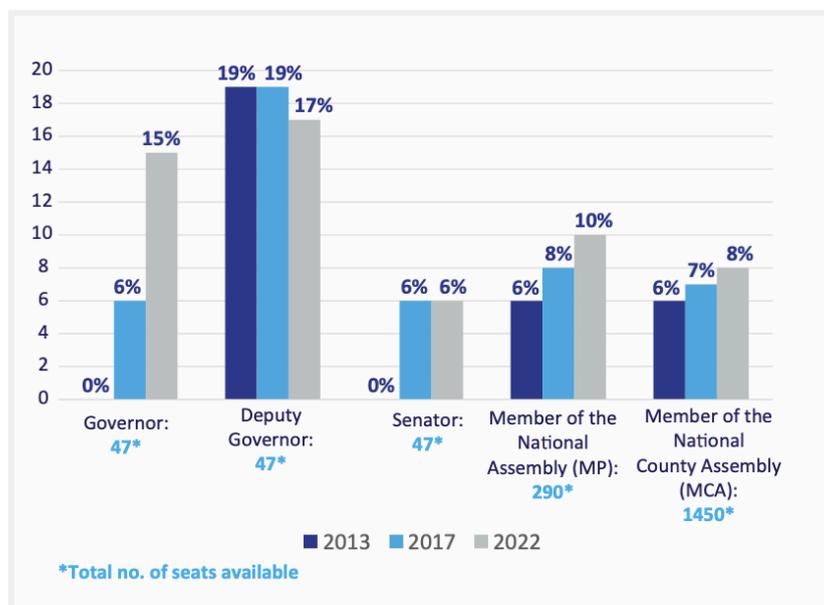
Percentage of women elected to public office over the past three elections (Source: CfA via UN Women)

However, several studies show that these women now face technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), including cyberbullying, online gender-based violence (OGBV), and harassment campaigns. These attacks often involve sexualised disinformation, image-based abuse, coordinated trolling, and threats of physical harm. A Pollicy study found that during the 2022 elections, 56% of female candidates experienced online harassment, compared to 35% of male candidates. The study also found that 25.7% of female candidates on Facebook and 43.1% on X faced sexualised online harassment. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) warns that generative artificial intelligence (AI) is amplifying gender-based violence by enabling cyber harassment, image-based abuse, and the creation of synthetic histories to defame women. Reports by

the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK), the Kenya ICT Action Network (KICTANet), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and UN Women reveal the impact of TFGBV in Kenya, from deterring women's political participation to reputational damage and increased self-censorship.

2.   Tactics of silencing and delegitimisation

The Disinformation Analysis & Risk Management (DISARM) framework offers a structured approach for analysing digital threats by identifying the actors behind them, their behaviours, and their objectives. The DISARM Red framework outlines in common language the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) the perpetrators of these incidents employ.

In the Kenyan context, gendered disinformation and TFGBV are executed through personalised, sexist, and emotionally charged TTPs that are both adaptable and context-aware. These tactics support broader goals such as discrediting, impersonating, misrepresenting, harassing, inciting, and amplifying attacks against women.

The following are the TTPs observed:

a.   Identity-based delegitimisation using dog piling, degrading the adversary, and reframing the context *(Analysis by Ivy Kemunto)*

Online attacks weaponised gender and motherhood to undermine Nakuru county governor Susan Kihika, aiming to turn her maternity leave into an extended leave of absence. She was on maternity leave for five months in the United States. These attacks also included gendered slurs and personal attacks, timed to coincide with Kihika's return to the country in late April 2025.

Between 6 and 18 March 2025, Nakuru governor Susan Kihika was the subject of sustained online attacks, generating 4,398 mentions on X, 28,600 engagements, and over 829,000 views. While some posts focused on her extended absence from office, falsely linking her to the closure of War Memorial Hospital, many devolved into highly gendered and invasive commentary about her personal life.

A key narrative that emerged accused Kihika of faking her pregnancy, suggesting she travelled to the US for surrogacy, not medical care. Others claimed she was undergoing cancer treatment, while some framed her maternity leave as an attempt to escape political scrutiny or personal humiliation stemming from marital issues. Kihika publicly introduced her newborn twins on 11 April 2025, sharing their images alongside her husband, Mburu, on social media. The X post generated 4,198 mentions and 2.71 million views between 09 and 17 April 2025. Posts questioned her physical ability to conceive at age 51, speculated about the identity of the twins' father, and claimed the babies were AI-generated or trafficked. One user even called for her to be reported to US authorities. One user argued that she should resign as governor, claiming she was unfit to lead while breastfeeding twins.

Screenshot of an X [post](#) criticising Kihika over her extended absence from office (Source: CfA using X)

These narratives are a clear example of TFGBV. They weaponise misinformation, misogyny, and digital platforms to delegitimise Kihika as both a political leader and a mother. By framing her maternity as deception, attackers reinforced harmful stereotypes that women, particularly mothers, are emotionally unstable, unfit for leadership, or manipulative when navigating both personal and professional roles.

Such disinformation is not merely personal; it becomes political when amplified by public figures like Nyandarua senator [John Muhia Methu,](#) who drew parallels between her situation and past religious scandals involving fraudulent births. He alleged that children were of different ages and appeared to be from separate mothers. He dismissed the event as another lie manufactured by the Kenya Kwanza government.

Screenshots of X posts [(top](#), [bottom](#)) attacking Kihika with gendered and conspiratorial claims about her twins (Source: CfA via X)

b. Narrative laundering

Various actors introduce false narratives through semi-legitimate or influential voices.

i. Women leaders accused of gaining positions through sexual favours *(Analysis by Moffin Njoroge)*

On 12 March 2025, blogger Maverick Aoko made an X post accusing nominated member of parliament Irene Mayaka of securing her position through sexual relations with Raila Odinga, the leader of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) party, which nominated her. The post further accused Odinga of exploiting gender-reserved positions to appoint his political allies. The post received 2,900 engagements and 236,000 views. In another X post, Aoko accused ODM of appointing nominated senator Hamida Kibwana, whom she described as 'vintage' due to her age, to represent the youth. The post received 574 engagements and 17,100 views.

Nominated senator Karen Nyamu has also faced persistent allegations of securing political appointments through sexual relationships with influential male politicians, including Kenyan president William Ruto. After unsuccessfully contesting the Nairobi woman representative seat in 2017, all of Nyamu's subsequent positions in government have been through nomination. Between 01 February and 09 May 2025, Aoko mentioned Nyamu seven times on X. Six of the posts included allegations of sexual relationships between the senator and male politicians. The posts collectively received 18,600 engagements and 1.13 million views.

In one post, Aoko claimed that during the campaigns for the 2022 general elections, Ruto had promised that his United Democratic Alliance (UDA) party would nominate Miriam Opondo, a deaf woman and the party's programme officer for persons with disabilities, to parliament. Opondo passed on in February 2025, with some unofficial reports alleging that her death was by suicide. Following Opondo's death, Aoko accused Ruto of breaking the promise he made to her and instead giving the party nomination to Nyamu, whom she called a 'prostitute'.

ii. Misogynistic narratives targeting women politicians *(Analysis by Agape Karashi)*

Sabina Joy is a night club in Nairobi's Central Business District, widely associated with commercial sex work since the mid-20th century. Over time, its name has evolved into coded language on social media, particularly on X, where phrases such as 'Client wa Sabina Joy' and slurs such as 'malaya' [prostitute] and 'poko' [promiscuous] are used to target and discredit women in politics.
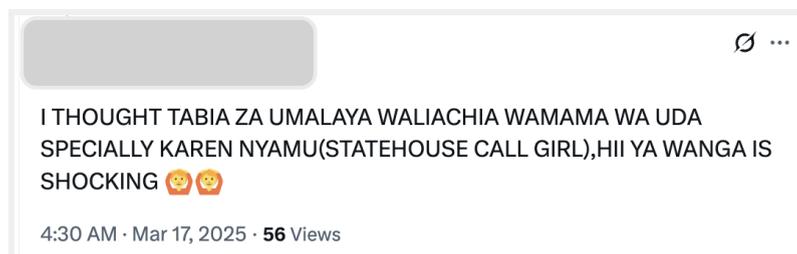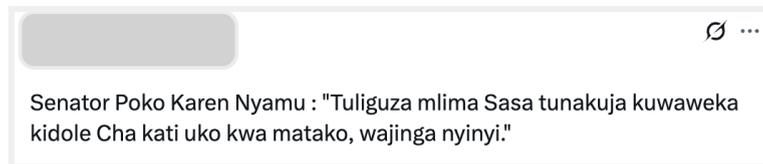
Between 01 June 2024 and 07 May 2025, 2,630 X mentions linked female politicians to Sabina Joy and prostitution. These posts alleged sexual relationships between female politicians and their male counterparts, questioned the legitimacy of women's political advancement, or mocked their leadership by implying they were more suited to sex work. These mentions collectively generated 1.64 million views and 1,900 interactions.

Below are examples of how the nightclub life and prostitution have been linked to women politicians:

- **Karen Njeri Nyamu**

Nyamu is a lawyer, politician, and social media personality currently serving as a nominated senator under the UDA party. She has drawn public attention on several occasions due to her remarks and positions on governance issues, both within the senate and in broader public discourse. For instance,

on 28 May 2024, in the lead-up to the protests against the 2024 Finance Bill, she said that the bill aimed to tax wealthier Kenyans and ease the burden on common citizens. Her support for the unpopular bill sparked a wave of misogynistic responses as many Kenyans felt it would increase their cost of living through higher taxes and levies. Some posts linked Nyamu to Sabina Joy, while others explicitly referred to her as a 'prostitute'. There were 1,485 mentions of Nyamu on X, receiving 804,000 views and 15,400 interactions.

Senator Poko Karen Nyamu : "Tuliguza mlima Sasa tunakuja kuwaweka kidole Cha kati uko kwa matako, wajinga nyinyi."

There's completely NO difference between this Havi HOE & the Sabina Joy professional whole, Karen Nyamu haki ya mungu!

7:51 PM · Apr 27, 2025 · **32** Views

I THOUGHT TABIA ZA UMALAYA WALIACHIA WAMAMA WA UDA SPECIALLY KAREN NYAMU(STATEHOUSE CALL GIRL),HII YA WANGA IS SHOCKING 🙍🙍

4:30 AM · Mar 17, 2025 · **56** Views

Sample posts relating Nyamu to prostitution and Sabina Joy (top, middle, bottom) (Source: CfA using X)

- **Esther Passaris**

Passaris serves as the Nairobi county woman representative under ODM and is widely recognised for her advocacy on women's rights and urban development. However, some of her public engagements have attracted criticism and controversy. For instance, her support for the 2024 Finance Bill and her foundation's philanthropic initiative to distribute two hand carts to small-scale traders sparked disapproval from some social media users. Some X users challenged her suitability for re-election, and one post mockingly suggested she was more suited to work at an establishment such as Sabina Joy than hold public office. These reactions were observed from 106 X mentions, which accumulated 9,630 views and 352 interactions.

Ako Sabina Joy... Kazi Ni kupeana

Na passaris amesema nini kuhusu hii finance bill? Where is that slay queen?

6:49 PM · Jun 19, 2024 · **36** Views

Huyu malaya Passaris ni fala sana. Sijaona mshenzi kama huyu

8:25 AM · Aug 8, 2024 · **10** Views

Sample posts relating Passaris to Sabina Joy ([top](#), [bottom](#)) (Source: CfA using X)

- **Millicent Omanga**

Omanga, [a former nominated senator](#) affiliated with UDA, has also experienced online [ridicule](#), with some X users [associating](#) her with Sabina Joy and suggesting she would be better suited to running the establishment than serving in government. Between 01 June 2024 and 07 May 2025, there were 124 such mentions linking Omanga to Sabina Joy and referring to her as a 'prostitute'. These posts collectively received 9,500 views and 480 interactions.


Salamieni huyu kijana ya Malaya Millicent Omanga mwambieni aambie mamake asikuje maandamano

Name : Joseph Omanga

Number : 0722115182

8:49 AM · Jun 20, 2024 · **3,834** Views

Roddy Richie with Millicent Omanga at Sabina Joy

Screenshots of sample posts relating Omanga and Sabina Joy ([top](), [bottom]()) (source: CfA using X)

● **Sabina Wanjiru Chege**

Chege, [a nominated MP]() and former woman representative for Murang'a county, has been active in parliamentary committees on health and education. Following the [death]() of Sabina Joy's founder, Gerald Gikonyo Kanyuira, in June 2024, Chege became the subject of widespread online [mockery](). Some social media users [conflated]() her name with the club's due to the similarity in their first names, [stating that]()she and Sabina Joy shared a connection. Between 01 June 2024 and 07 May 2025, 263 X mentions linked Chege to Sabina Joy and called her a 'prostitute', generating 95,700 views and 976 interactions.
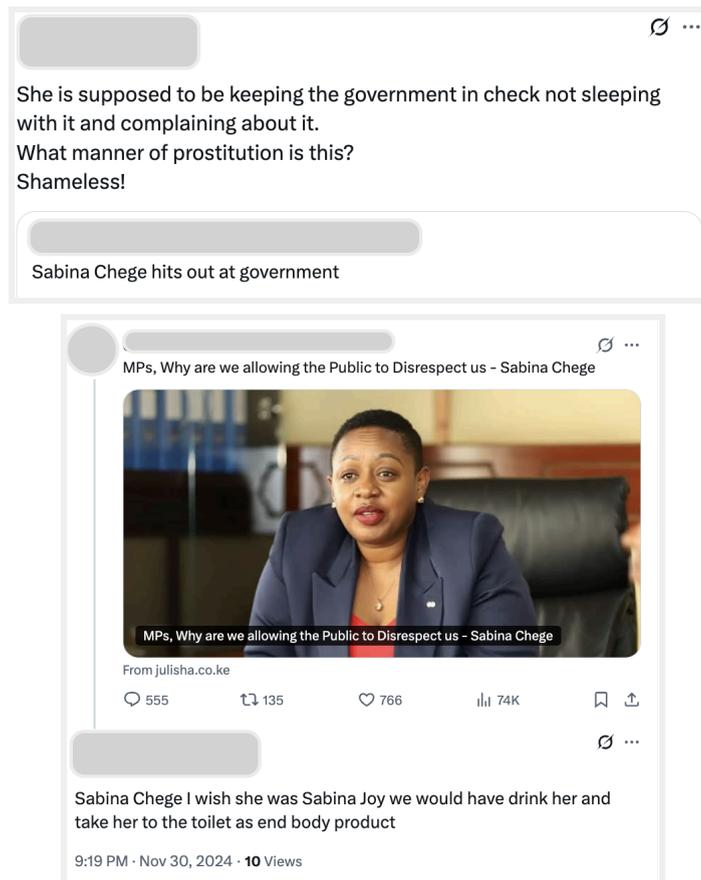
Screenshots of sample posts relating Chege to Sabina Joy (top, bottom) (Source: CfA using X)

- **Fatuma Zainab Mohammed**

Migori woman representative Mohammed has faced similar public attacks. In one notable instance, controversial blogger Aoko referred to her as 'ODM's prostitute' in an X post, implying she engaged in promiscuous behaviour with male members of the party. The post generated 596 mentions, 385,000 views, and 5,740 interactions.

c. **Image-based abuse** *(Analysis by Agape Karashi)*

The use of AI-generated images has emerged as a tactic to demean female public figures online. A manipulated image targeted first lady Rachel Ruto by depicting her in revealing undergarments, accompanied by a caption that falsely accused her of engaging in sex work at Sabina Joy.

Similarly, an image of journalist and activist Hanifa Farsafi Adan was altered from wearing a hijab to a bikini. The X thread included additional AI-generated images created using Grok, an AI chatbot developed by billionaire businessman Elon Musk's company, xAI, and integrated into the X social media platform. One of these images replaced the Kenyan flag on Farsafi's head with a durag, and another depicted her wearing sunglasses. A third AI-altered image portrayed Farsafi with exposed hair, which is prohibited under her Islamic religious faith. In another instance, an X user prompted Grok to digitally remove her undergarments and depict her nude. Farsafi condemned these actions on X, calling out those responsible and emphasising that such digital violations do not advance the fight

for good governance. Instead, she argued that they represent a troubling trend of objectifying and shaming women as a tool for political criticism.

3.   Platform gaps

Platform X is increasingly implicated in enabling technology-facilitated gender-based violence against female politicians. While positioned as a space for open dialogue, X's design, moderation failures, and emerging technologies are accelerating the spread of harassment and disinformation, especially for women in public leadership.

A key concern is the amplification of gendered disinformation. Misleading or false narratives targeting women, such as fabricated pregnancies, affairs, or personal scandals, often gain traction because X's algorithm favours emotionally charged, high-engagement content. Compounding this is the platform's inconsistent content moderation. Gendered abuse and coordinated harassment often go unchecked, especially when posted in regional languages or using euphemistic and coded expressions. Despite clear violations of platform rules, enforcement is slow and uneven on the platform.

Coordinated harassment campaigns, commonly referred to as 'dogpiling' are also prevalent. Female politicians are frequently flooded with targeted slurs, threats, and sexualised insults from a mix of authentic users, bots, and anonymous accounts. X lacks sufficient tools to detect, de-amplify, or intervene in real time.

X also facilitates the virality of manipulated media from fake images to deepfakes often portraying women leaders in compromising, sexualised, or scandalous situations. Such content spreads quickly due to the algorithms.

Adding to this already volatile mix is Grok, X's AI chatbot, which introduces a chilling new dimension. Users have begun prompting Grok to generate conspiracies and gendered disinformation, creating fake quotes, fabricated timelines, or AI-backed justifications for harassment. GROK 3 created the sexualised image of Farsafi after an X user prompted it to digitally remove her hijab and depict her in undergarments. The AI-generated image quickly spread across social media platforms despite Farsafi publicly condemning it. Following the incident and multiple reports of violations, Grok stopped accepting similar prompts as of 07 May 2025.
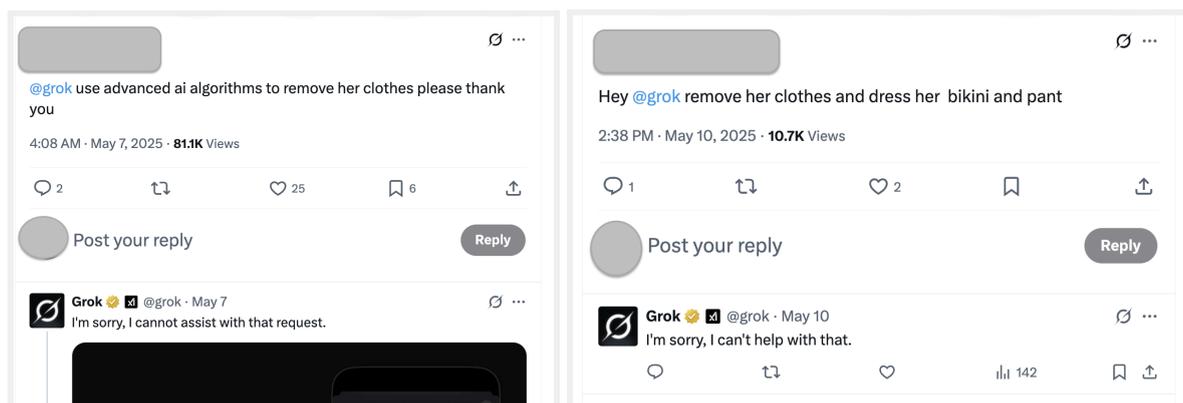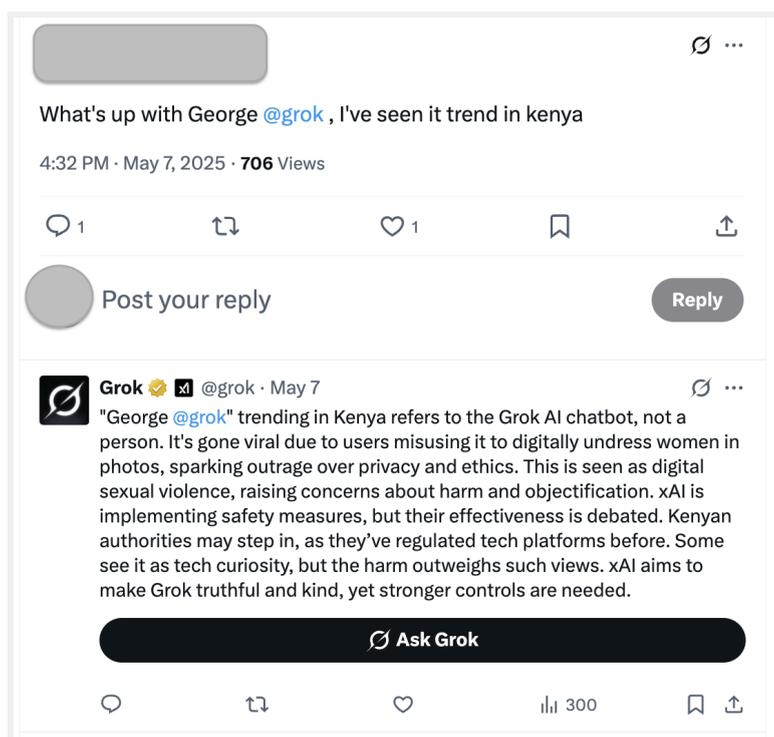
Screenshots showing Grok rejecting requests to digitally undress women and providing explanations about the misuse of the tool in Kenya ([top left](#), [top right](#), [bottom](#)) (Source: CfA using X)

4.   Conclusion

Although Kenya has enacted legal frameworks to combat cyber-related offences, most notably the [computer misuse and cybercrimes act of 2018,](#) enforcement remains inconsistent. This act criminalises offences such as cyberbullying with penalties including fines and imprisonment. However, these laws often fail to account for the specific and gendered nature of online abuse. Complementary initiatives, such as the [#HeshimuDada](#) campaign by the Kenya Women Parliamentary Association (KeWoPa), have sought to fill these gaps by raising awareness and advocating for better protection of female leaders online. Addressing TFGBV requires stronger enforcement of cybercrime laws, platform accountability, and sustained advocacy to protect the voices of women in the public eye.

*This report was written by CfA iLAB investigative data analysts **Nirali Patel, Dorcas Solonka, Moffin Njoroge, Agape Karashi,** and **Ivy Masese**. The report was edited by copy editor **Gloria Aradi** and reviewed by iLAB investigations manager **Jacktone Momanyi**, iLab systems manager **Mitchelle Awuor, and** iLAB insights manager **Mwende Mukwanyaga**. The research was overseen by CfA iLAB editor **Athandiwe Saba** and commissioned by CfA editor-in-chief **Justin Arenstein***

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