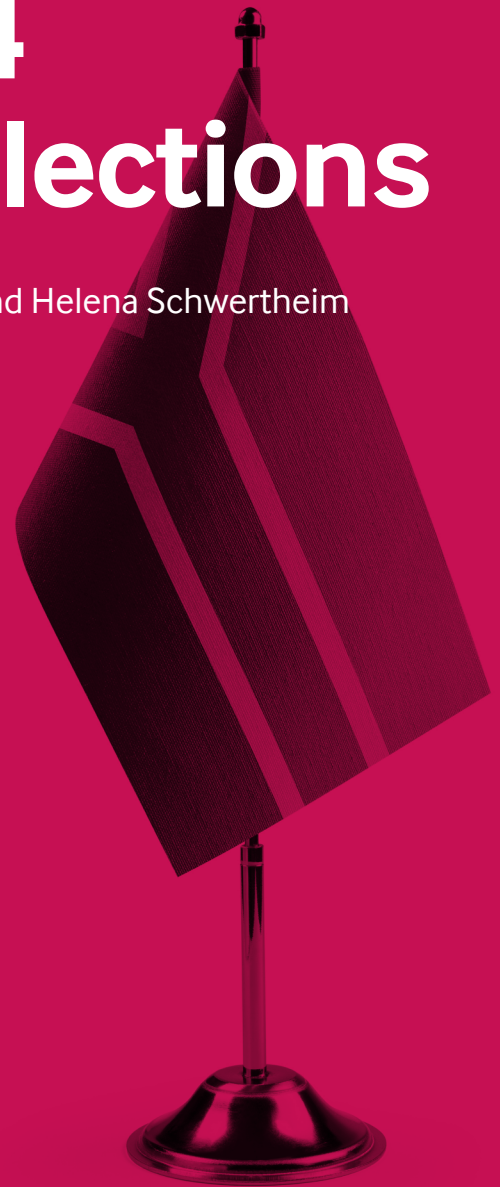


Online Gendered Abuse and Disinformation During the 2024 South African Elections

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Summary

Today, the rights of women and girls in South Africa are threatened by a striking rate of violence, one of the highest in the world.¹ The threat of gender-based violence follows South African women and girls in every aspect of their lives, whether at work, home or school.

With 26 million active social media users in South Africa, approximately half of whom are women, gender-based violence has inevitably followed women online too.² While Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) is often reflective of larger societal issues, it should be treated just as seriously and comprehensively as offline gender-based violence. Due to the nature of the online ecosystem, however, this is often not the case: threats, harassment, bullying and other violent language may seem less urgent or impactful when they happen online.

With this context in mind, ISD sought to understand how OGBV affects South African women, focusing on the experience of women politicians, candidates and political figures during one of South Africa's most historic general elections. ISD analysts used a combination of qualitative and quantitative analytical methods, interviews with experts and knowledge drawn from online and in-person workshops to answer the following questions:

- To what extent is abusive content, gendered disinformation, targeted harassment or hate speech a problem for South African women in politics navigating the online ecosystem?
- What legislative framework is in place in South Africa to protect women online and offline?
- How are social media platforms approaching the South African context, especially surrounding elections?
- What tactics are used by bad actors to advance OGBV in the South African context?

ISD's analysis found that South African women in politics often face abuse online in the form of replies or comments to their posts or content about them. Misogynistic actors tend to target their physical attributes, intelligence and ability to lead. They also often engage with gendered disinformation narratives which sexualise or objectify women. While the legislative frameworks in South Africa

are progressive and comprehensive, enforcement is difficult and many women are unaware of the resources available to them. Social media platforms also have policies that address OGBV and gendered disinformation but their enforcement is weak, especially outside of English language content.

This report provides ISD's key findings, an overview of the South African context, an introduction to the current legal framework in place to protect South African women offline and online, and relevant social media platform policies and infrastructure put in place in preparation for the South African election. It then presents the findings from three case studies looking at abusive content, gendered disinformation and harassment targeting women politicians on TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. Finally, it recommends ways that social media platforms and policymakers can better protect South African women online.

Key Findings and Recommendations

Key findings from the research conducted by ISD:

- While the most prevalent OGBV is often found in private online spaces including direct or private messages, group chats and email, ISD also found OGBV in public spaces online, where it **was most prevalent in replies or comment sections**.
- Misogynistic actors tend to attack women based on **their physical attributes, intelligence and ability to lead**. They also objectify and sexualise women of all ages in politics; in public spaces, this often occurs in the comment sections of content that does not address their personal lives.
- Gendered disinformation narratives are used to delegitimise women in positions of power, **promoting misogynistic tropes and stereotypes that women are not fit to lead**.
- TikTok **does not limit, restrict or block content that uses non-English South African vernacular targeting and degrading women**. Equivalent terms in English are banned from the platform.
- X and TikTok have platform policies in place that should hypothetically protect women online **but do not sufficiently enforce these policies** – especially in replies and comment sections.
- Social media platforms do not adequately moderate non-English language content, **allowing much abusive content in different languages to slip through the cracks**.

Based on ISD's desk research, interviews and the workshops conducted, this report provides concrete and actionable policy recommendations for the Government of South Africa and online platforms and services to tackle OGBV in South Africa. The full policy recommendations can be found later [in this report](#), however, in summary:

Recommendations for the Government of South Africa:

- The newly implemented National Council on Gender Based-Violence and Femicide should include OGBV in its remit and reporting. The Council is a commendable effort to address GBV in South Africa. However, OGBV is not addressed, despite an increasing evidence base (to which this report contributes) of OGBV perpetration against women in politics and public-facing roles.
- South Africa has a comprehensive legal framework on elections, online harms and GBV. However, there are significant gaps in the enforcement of these laws, as well as in citizen awareness and empowerment to utilise existing legal remedies for protection and redress against OGBV. Appropriate resourcing must be earmarked for proper implementation of the existing legal framework.
- A comprehensive, whole-of-society approach is required to effectively address OGBV in South Africa, including the development of inclusive educational programmes.
- Better reporting systems of OGBV should be created and deployed. These should be supported by specialist training for law enforcement and other social safety stakeholders to provide trauma-informed support for victims of OGBV and hate crimes.
- The FPB, South Africa's media regulator, should provide an accessible, public-facing clarification of its role in taking down unclassified, prohibited or potentially prohibited content, particularly concerning OGBV.
- The Government should ensure a minimum required level of platform transparency through appropriate, standardised processes. The Government should take the following measures to address the current gap in platform accountability and transparency, including:
 - Facilitating data access for independent researchers. Consider requiring platforms to provide standardised access to already public data for public interest researchers. This would enable more comprehensive analysis of platform practices, the online safety of users, and the nature and scale of online harms such as OGBV.

- Oblige platforms to issue regular transparency reporting, including on content moderation policies.

Recommendations for online platforms and services:

- In order to improve bilingual and non-English content moderation practices, platforms should:
 - Expand multilingual content moderation: Platforms should commit to moderating content in all 12 official South African languages, recognising the linguistic diversity of their users.
 - Increase transparency of moderation efforts: Platforms should provide clear, public information on the number and language capabilities of content moderators, ideally in annually published reports.
 - Develop inclusive moderation policies: Platforms should create and implement content moderation policies and teams that are inclusive and culturally sensitive. This includes understanding the local context and nuances of language use to better address OGBV and other harmful content effectively.
 - Collaborate with local experts: Platforms should consult and collaborate with South African GBV and advocates for gender equality, scholars and survivors with lived experience when developing the methodology for transparency reports or any internal research.
 - Develop and standardise transparency reporting efforts on OGBV:
 - Include gender-disaggregated data: Platforms should develop enforcement reports that include gender-disaggregated data.
 - Standardise reporting efforts: Platforms should work with each other on cross-platform initiatives to standardise transparency reporting. This effort should align with global work being undertaken by UN Women to develop a statistical framework for technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression's development of a common definition for gendered disinformation.
 - Apply a victim-survivor-centred Safety by Design approach:
 - Taking a victim-survivor-centred perspective, the development of user interfaces and tools should apply a gender and trauma-informed lens throughout all stages.
 - Platforms should adopt proactive measures that support user agency with tools that protect their privacy and reduce exposure to OGBV, and accountability measures that deter perpetrators appropriately.
-

Glossary

Defamation is lying about or misrepresenting an individual online to damage their reputation and/or relationships.

Doxxing involves retrieving and publishing personal or identifying information (e.g. addresses, phone numbers, emails and partners' or children's names) without permission.

Femicide is the killing of women and girls for reasons intrinsically linked to their gender. It is an umbrella term that encompasses intimate partner violence, 'honour' killings, and other forms of homicide against women and girls.

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to "violence directed against a person because of that person's gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately".³ Women and the LGBTQ+ community, including transgender and gender-diverse people, experience disproportionate rates of GBV. This definition aligns closely with South Africa's own definition of GBV under the National Council on Gender Based-Violence and Femicide Act (2024) (see the [Legal Framework](#) section of this report).

Gendered disinformation is a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women in public life; it often involves some degree of coordination among participants. It is specifically aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. These attacks often build on sexist narratives and gender stereotypes with the goal of framing women politicians and public office holders as inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, or too emotional or libidinous to participate in politics.⁴ Once women have stepped out of the public eye, the abuse drops completely, incentivising them to not participate in politics. Gendered disinformation is particularly pronounced around elections and other democratic events.

Image-based sexual abuse involves the creation, distribution and sharing or threat of sharing intimate images/videos of a person without their consent. This includes original, manipulated and generated content.

Online gender-based hate speech attacks or humiliates persons based on their gender identities and expressions. The risk of becoming a target is higher with intersecting identity factors such as a person's sexual identity, ethnicity, race, religion or disability.

Online gender-based violence (OGBV) is a subset of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV). It refers⁵ to any "act that is committed, assisted, aggravated or amplified by the use of information communication technologies or other digital tools, that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological, social, political, or economic harm, or other infringements of rights and freedoms".

Online harassment encompasses a wide range of behaviours online that are designed to intimidate an individual or community. Harassment can be a precursor to online and offline threats.

Online mobbing is when a large number of people simultaneously engage in online harassment or online abuse against a single individual. Online mobbing can also be coordinated by various bad actors.

Threats of offline violence include rape and death threats as well as incitement to physical violence.

Introduction and Background

On 29 May 2024, South Africans voted in one of the country’s most consequential general elections since 1994, following the end of apartheid and enactment of universal suffrage. For the first time in South Africa’s history as a full democracy, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party, which led the anti-apartheid and liberation movement, was projected to lose its majority.⁶ On 2 June 2024, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) confirmed what many polls and political pundits around the world had predicted: though still the largest party, the ANC did not win a majority and South Africa would have a coalition government.

In another historic political move, the ANC formed a “unity government” with its main rival, the Democratic Alliance (DA). This led to criticism from voters and other parties that the ANC had joined a coalition with what some see as a party only representing wealthy white South Africans.⁷ The ongoing racial tensions across the country were a prominent electoral issue, as were healthcare, corruption, the ongoing energy crisis and immigration policies to land reform, housing, unemployment and crime.

Perhaps one of the most striking issues is nestled under crime: the problem of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa. According to UN Women, the rate of violence against women and girls in the country is among the highest in the world.⁸ The reported sexual assault rate in South Africa was 72.1 per 100,000 people in 2019-2020 but may be much higher.⁹ In 2020, following significant public outrage, protests, and media coverage of rape and femicide cases,¹⁰ the South African government launched a ten-year National Strategic Plan on Gender-based Violence and Femicide (NSP-GBVF); current President Cyril Ramaphosa called GBV the “second pandemic” in South Africa.¹¹

GBV has also made its way into online spaces in South Africa. A 2020 study found that more than 23 percent of South African women have experienced some form of online violence, with many expressing concerns about their digital safety.¹² Among women in prominent positions, this percentage is much higher: a 2023 snapshot survey conducted by the South African Human Rights Commission revealed that more than 70 percent of respondents with backgrounds in politics, law, journalism and academia indicated that they had been abused or harassed online.¹³

Recent research focused on Ferial Haffajee and Pauli van Wyk, two women investigative reporters at the independent South African outlet the Daily Maverick.¹⁴ Using a variety of research methods, the International Center for Journalists found that most abuse targeting the two consisted of personal attacks, intended to discredit them professionally. It was typically sexist, misogynistic and/or sexualised in nature.¹⁵

These studies and others, including a report funded by Meta,¹⁶ indicate that the highest proportion of OGBV in South Africa occurs on Facebook, WhatsApp and X (formerly Twitter). Research has found a lack of effective moderation: X failed to remove abusive content and accounts after reports were made, even when this was reported by the targeted individuals themselves.¹⁷ Past ISD research on gendered abuse in the US,¹⁸ including ahead of the 2022 midterm elections,¹⁹ evidenced similar trends across platforms including TikTok, Facebook and Instagram. Platform failures are compounded by the fact that almost one-third of South African women do not know where to turn for reliable information on online security.²⁰ Online attacks have also had an observable silencing impact: women said that abuse has led them to be wary online, avoid responding to perpetrators and limit their social media usage.²¹

Moreover, social media platforms do not always have a financial incentive to swiftly address OGBV, especially when the content is highly inflammatory and quickly going viral. While the methodology of this report did not analyse the profit social media platforms generated from content containing OGBV, previous ISD research has found hateful and/or harmful content can be sources of revenue for companies – especially when the content falls in a grey area.²² Furthermore, platform algorithms aim towards increased engagement from users: the more users interact with content and spend time on the platform, the more revenue a platform can make from a user.²³

For this report, ISD assessed how three major social media platforms – TikTok, X and Facebook – addressed OGBV, gendered disinformation and targeted harassment against female political figures and candidates. The work focused on key election months – from 20 February 2024, when President Ramaphosa announced the election date, to 3 June 2024, a day after the IEC declared the election results.

ISD first examined the current legal framework in place to protect South African women online as well as specific social media platform policies and statements related to elections in the country. With these frameworks as a backdrop, ISD used its hate speech definitions (see [Glossary](#)) to help guide the qualitative case studies on TikTok, X and Facebook.

Simultaneously, ISD analysts interviewed key stakeholders in civil society, media, politics and academia with knowledge and experience of OGBV in the South African landscape. These interviews corroborated research from secondary sources and ISD's own findings, adding crucial and intersectional perspectives of the South African context. Both before and after the election, ISD facilitated workshops with women public office holders, academics, regulators and civil servants, which included conversations about experiences of OGBV and mitigation measures. These interviews and workshops, along with ISD's findings and analysis of existing policies, helped inform policy recommendations for platforms, policymakers, researchers and civil society.

Legal Framework

South African law on elections, online harms and GBV is extensive and comprehensive. The most relevant laws for this report are presented below.

Law	Mandate	Relevant Provisions
Constitution (1996)	Legal foundation of South Africa, including an expansive human rights framework.	Provides for freedom from discrimination on the grounds of many characteristics, including gender, sex and orientation. Limits freedom of expression in cases of incitement to violence or advocacy of hatred that incites harm.
Electoral Act (1998)	Regulates electoral processes at the national, provincial and municipal levels. Establishes the Electoral Code of Conduct.	Requires all political candidates to acknowledge and sign the Electoral Code of Conduct, which bars false statements about other candidates, and language or action that provokes violence or intimidates candidates, party members or voters. Includes provisions on the respect and inclusion of women in political processes. Sanctions include fines, disqualification and prohibition from campaigning.
Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000)	Prohibits unfair discrimination in the private and public sectors, as well as by individuals.	Criminalises unfair discrimination on the grounds of gender, as well as gendered hate speech and harassment.
Electronic Communications and Transaction Act (2002)	Regulates electronic transactions and communications in South Africa, including via e-transactions, email, the internet and SMS.	Requires internet service providers to respond to takedown notices on illegal content, including notices regarding hate speech or defamation.
Cybercrimes Act (2020)	Primary law criminalising harmful online activities.	Bars electronic content that incites or threatens violence to people or damage to property. Criminalises the non-consensual sharing of intimate images.
Films and Publications Amendment Act (2022)	Updates media regulation to account for the online sphere, covering the distribution of films, games and publications. It includes all user-generated content on social media and video-sharing platforms.	Empowers the FPB to remove prohibited content online. It is the primary takedown mechanism for harmful online content. Any member of the public can lodge a complaint with the FPB regarding unclassified, prohibited or potentially prohibited content. Prohibited content includes incitement to imminent violence and advocacy of hatred that incites causing harm.

National Council on Gender Based-Violence and Femicide Act (2024)	Establishes a National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide to coordinate national efforts to combat GBV and femicides.	Defines GBV within South African law as “violence associated with gender, which includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, economic, domestic, educational or psychological abuse or threats of such acts of abuse in public or private life”. Mandates the Council to create an action plan to implement the national strategy for addressing GBV and femicide. Does not explicitly address OGBV.
Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill (incoming, not in force at time of writing)	Aims to reduce harmful and hate speech, as well as hate crimes. This bill was sent for Presidential assent in December 2023 but at the time of writing has not yet been signed.	Updates and clarifies the definitions of hate speech and hate crimes within South African law. Recognises and protects a range of characteristics, including sex, gender and sexual orientation. Explicitly includes online hate speech.

This legal framework has received some criticism. The 1996 constitution is considered one of the world’s most progressive in the world, although its implementation and goals are not consistently realised.²⁴ This is likely due to a combination of institutional and societal factors. Societal norms tend to change more slowly than the law, and new laws will not immediately shift societal conditions that enable GBV online and offline in the first place.²⁵

In addition, lawyers and civil society organisations have raised freedom of expression concerns regarding the forthcoming Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill and the FPB Amendment Act. The former has been criticised for its potentially overly broad interpretation of constitutional limits on freedom of expression, which is considered of particular importance in the multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-faith post-Apartheid context.²⁶ Critics of the FPB Amendment Act argue that by expanding the FPB’s mandate, the new law unduly increases state control over the online space, because the FPB operates under the auspices of the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies and therefore does not have full independence.²⁷ Lawyers and civil society have also argued that courts would be better equipped to adjudicate on reasonable limitations to the constitutionally-protected right to freedom of expression.²⁸

In interviews with experts, ISD found the interviewees overwhelmingly agreed that the problem of GBV and OGBV did not lie in the lack of legal framework in South Africa – in fact, the framework was widely seen as comprehensive

and progressive. Instead, they saw the issue as stemming from the lack of support to implement and enforce these frameworks at all levels. The mechanisms for reporting and justice are not always publicised adequately or accessible. Additionally, interviewees agreed that the major social media platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and X are not doing enough to protect South African women even where policies exist.

South Africa’s legal framework lays out the legal protections in place to safeguard South African women online and what avenues to legal remedy may be open to them. This is to be commended but must be balanced with the protection of free speech. At a time when digital policies can be used to violate citizens’ freedom of expression, privacy and other fundamental rights, transparency and consistency in policy development is imperative. For example, Turkey’s 2020 Social Media Law criminalises misinformation, as defined by the government, and has been used to stifle independent news outlets, especially voices critical to the president and government.²⁹ Similarly, India’s 2021 Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, and its 2023 amendment to include the regulation of misinformation, aim to mitigate online risks. However, they have been widely criticised by journalists and civil society for infringing on freedom of expression and unduly increasing state control over the internet, including stifling the voices of critics and human rights defenders.³⁰ Policymakers who uphold democratic values in South Africa and beyond, must ensure transparency and accountability be baked into digital policies.

Platform policies and statements about South African elections

Several platforms made statements or publicised collaborations prior to the election, largely focused on aiming to ensure electoral integrity online. Examining these statements on election policies is key to understanding the extent to which platform prepared measures for the National or regional elections in South Africa, and how they relate to OGBV. However, no platform had a public framework for specifically addressing OGBV in South Africa, and an estimated 35 percent of OGBV reported to platforms remains unresolved in the country.³¹ Investigations from legal and civil society groups have also found that Facebook, X, TikTok and YouTube have all approved ads in multiple languages which include extreme, violent misogynistic hate speech against South African women journalists, despite platform policies prohibiting hate speech.³²

- Prior to the elections, the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC) announced a continuation of their partnership with Google, Meta, TikTok and the non-profit organisation MMA.³³ All parties also signed a non-binding Framework of Cooperation, which included obligations to align South African law, establish a multistakeholder working group to address disinformation, and enable cooperation with the IEC and MMA on national disinformation and ads transparency initiatives.
- On 12 April, Meta announced that it would activate a South Africa-specific Elections Operations Center to identify and mitigate threats in real time.³⁴ It claimed to have “the largest fact-checking network of any platform” covering English, Afrikaans, Zulu, Sotho and Setswana. Meta also detailed its contributions to the IEC’s Framework of Cooperation; these included training IEC staff and “government communicators”, as well as running anti-hate speech and misinformation campaigns. Facebook and Instagram’s Community Standards both prohibit the nonconsensual sharing of intimate imagery, posting credible threats to harm or incitement to violence, the sharing of others’ private residential or contact information, and gendered hate speech.³⁵
- On 18 April, Google announced its measures to address electoral integrity. Most of these are deployed across the African continent and in other regions.³⁶ Measures specific to the South African election

included linking to authoritative sources including the IEC and training political parties’ representatives on Google’s elections integrity measures, such as recommended security protocols and reporting and removal processes. Google also funds a fact-checking coalition, in collaboration with regional fact-checking organisation Africa Check and South African media. Google’s South Africa Election Ads policy also requires advertiser verification. However, this does not extend to issue ads on electorally salient topics, such as migration and energy, which can also be vectors for disinformation.³⁷

- On 19 April, TikTok released a statement about its measures to support electoral integrity prior to the election.³⁸ These included the establishment of a dedicated “Mission Control” space prior to the election, although its capacity – including the allocation of staff and language capacity – was not described. TikTok has since before the election collaborated with the Code for Africa coalition on fact-checking in multiple, unspecified South African languages. TikTok also works with Africa Fact Check to deliver media literacy resources on the platform, which cover English, Afrikaans, isiZulu, isiXhosa and sign language. The TikTok app also has an Election Centre, which displays content on elections in isiZulu, Afrikaans, Sesotho, Setswana and English. TikTok’s Community Guidelines do not allow violent threats, hateful slurs or promoting hateful ideologies, such as racial supremacy or misogyny.³⁹
- X did not release any statements on the election. It allows political content and campaign ads in South Africa, although advertisers are restricted from promoting misleading or dissuading information related to elections.⁴⁰

Platform Policies on OGBV and Gendered Disinformation

A key factor in reducing and minimising online gendered hate is improving platform policies which protect their users who identify as women. ISD analysts reviewed existing policies from the three mainstream social media platforms in this study (TikTok, X and Facebook) to assess what measures each platform has in place to protect women online. The table below breaks down how women across the three platforms are theoretically protected from different forms of abuse and hate (if at all) and is drawn from past ISD research on online misogyny and gendered disinformation.

X's rules and policies prohibit "behavior that targets individuals or groups with abuse based on their perceived membership in a protected category". This includes women, people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, and marginalised and historically underrepresented communities. According to its policies, the use of slurs, sexist tropes and hateful imagery is forbidden on the platform. Additionally, X's harassment policy prohibits "unwanted sexual discussion of someone's body" or "any

other content that otherwise sexualises an individual without their consent". However, ISD found X posts using abusive and misogynistic language to sexualise and objectify women in the study.

Similarly, Meta's community standards prohibit hate speech which it defines as "a direct attack against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics." The same policy bans "dehumanising speech, harmful stereotypes, statements of inferiority, expressions of contempt, disgust or dismissal" based on one or several protected characteristics. Theoretically, this could include gendered disinformation, but it is not named specifically in policies. Meta also has specific rules for public figures, acknowledging a "distinction" in the implementation of its policies between "public figures" and "private individuals".

TikTok's community guidelines defines hate speech and hateful behaviour as something that "attacks, threatens, dehumanizes or degrades an individual or group based on their characteristics." These include "race, ethnicity,

	TikTok	X	Facebook
Sex, gender and gender identity are protected attributes under hate speech policy.	Yes ⁴¹	Yes ⁴²	Yes ⁴³
Hate speech policy explicitly addresses all features of a platform, including but not limited to profiles, comments and replies.	Yes ⁴⁴ , mentioned at the introduction of the platform's Community Guidelines. Unlike Facebook and X, TikTok's policies are all on one page.	Yes ⁴⁵	Yes ⁴⁶ , but only mentioned separately on a different page introducing the Community Guidelines.
Harassment policy addresses sexualization and objectification.	Yes ⁴⁷	Yes ⁴⁸	Yes ⁴⁹ , but is applied only in "severe" cases.
Platform has a policy specifically for gendered and/or sexualised mis- and disinformation.	No	No	No
ISD found instances of content that could violate platform policies.	Yes	Yes	No

■ Table 1: An overview of TikTok, X, and Facebook platform policies aimed to protect women online.

national origin, religion, caste, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, serious disease, disability and immigration status”. Though the platform itself claims to bar aspects of gendered disinformation, it still plays a part in the content found in this study. The ease of creating content and TikTok’s algorithms (which tailor closely to an individual’s interest) allow certain narratives to gain mass attention rapidly amongst audiences worldwide. This virality serves as an outlet for major global and cultural events, which can in turn serve as a catalyst for misogynistic rhetoric.

On paper, these announcements and policies by TikTok, Meta and X are positive developments, but are not significant enough or effective. A lack of transparency on platform processes, such as content moderation and lack of access to platform data, makes it difficult to independently assess the impact of these measures to protect election integrity and the online safety of South African women.

This report makes use of available data to provide insights on the risks posed to women online. However, beyond this, more meaningful data access and transparency on platform policies and processes would allow regulators and independent researchers to better track the enforcement of platforms’ policies and compliance with the South African legal framework.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: TikTok Searches, Comments and Hashtags

Methodology

This case study was conducted qualitatively and manually as ISD does not have access to the TikTok Application Programming Interface (API).

Researchers first generated a list of keywords in a range of South African languages and in English that are often used to target or degrade women. These keywords were drawn from a number of sources including:

- Initial ethnographic monitoring ahead of the South African elections,
- ISD's past research on online misogyny and abuse targeting women,
- Insights from interviews,
- Discussions with people living in South Africa.

Analysts also compiled a list of 10 former or current women politicians, or candidates who hold high-profile leadership positions within their parties (ANC, GOOD, EFF and DA). The two lists can be found in the Appendix.

Analysts then searched on TikTok for videos that used the terms or names in the two lists. Following feedback from interviews and initial research findings, analysts focused on the comment sections of videos and scrolled through, noting and coding any potentially violative comments. Data collection lasted roughly three days during which time analysts identified 57 potentially violative comments under 21 videos about the 10 former or current women politicians or candidates.

Separately, analysts also searched the abusive keywords and language in South African vernacular on TikTok to see if the platform had pre-emptively banned or restricted their use. To provide comparative analysis, analysts did the same on Instagram due to the similar features the platform has to TikTok (a search bar, short-form video content, etc.).

Findings

ISD observed that the majority of comments observed (54/57) targeted women currently or formerly associated with the ANC (women in the ANC made up 19 out of 59 women in the list). Only two of the women politicians or candidates — both affiliated with parties other than the

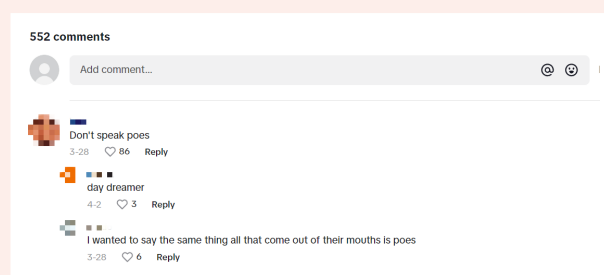
ANC — appeared to have TikTok accounts with publicly available videos. Most potentially violative comments were found under videos posted by accounts which regularly post about news and politics, as opposed to being posted by the women themselves, their cabinets or their parties.

The majority of videos had a neutral lens, posting clips of interviews, speeches or news broadcasts without obvious partisanship. Several of the posts outwardly criticised the women politicians: analysts did not observe that abusive comments under these were significantly more numerous or virulent than the more objective videos.

Analysts primarily read English-language comments due to capacity limits stemming from the manual nature of conducting research on TikTok. Comments fully or partially written in Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa were selectively translated, particularly when analysts noted that they contained a keyword from the list in the Appendix. Despite these limitations, analysis found that 33 out of 57 comments in ISD's sample included at least one non-English word, indicating a potential gap in moderation standards across languages on the platform.

Furthermore, 13 out of these 33 comments were primarily written in English but switched languages when spreading obscenities or more egregious narratives. This suggests an intentional effort to avoid English when posting the most harmful content, whether to avoid content moderation or to draw on a wider range of expression. A lot of the content also used the South African insult “poes” — while ISD found this insult is widely used across the country, it has misogynistic origins. The term “poes”

Figure 1: Example of two comments—left underneath a video of ANC Minister and Member of Parliament Mmamoloko Kubayi speaking—which begin in English but use a derogatory term in Afrikaans.



refers to a woman's genitalia in Afrikaans but has become accepted into the culture that South Africans may not think of it as a gendered insult anymore. This shows how misogyny can engrain itself into colloquial language and slang, to the point where it becomes invisible. Because of its origins, ISD still considered the term a gendered insult.

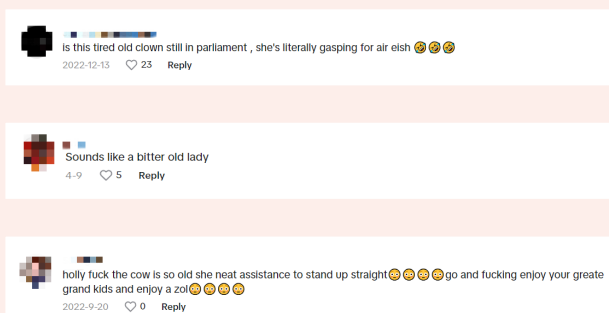
ISD observed several different categories of hate faced by women politicians and candidates on TikTok:

1 Demographic-based attacks: age and physical attributes

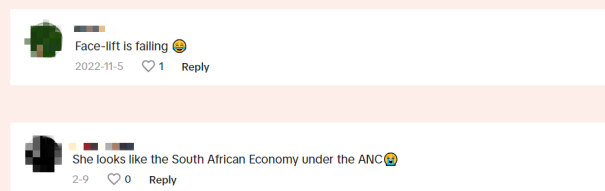
Several of the comments in the sample targeted the women for their age, claiming they were too old to be public figures or politicians. Comments targeting the age of older politicians are common regardless of gender, but analysts found that the comments in our sample were often paired with misogynistic, abusive and degrading language. Users most frequently targeted Patricia de Lille of the GOOD party, who is 73 years old, attacking her as a "bitter old lady", an "old bastard", "old has been", "old low life", "old bag" and several other variations. Two comments claimed de Lille was past her "sell by date", objectifying her and suggesting that women cannot work or participate in society after a certain age.

Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, ex-wife of former President Jacob Zuma, who is also over 70 years old, was another popular target. Users called Dlamini Zuma a "tired old clown" who was "gasping for air", an "old witch", and said that she needed to "go and fucking enjoy [her great] grand kids". ISD's interviews with experts corroborated the fact that Dlamini Zuma is a frequent target online due to her personal history with Jacob Zuma – who now

Figures 2 – 4: Comments attacking the age and physical attributes of women in the seed list.



Figures 5 – 6: More comments attacking the age or physical attributes of women in the seed list.



Comments in the sample also degraded the physical attributes of the women – commenting on their looks or bodies. Analysts observed users calling women a "wasplank", an Afrikaans term used to compare a woman's body to a wash plank, suggesting she is flat and has no shape. Other comments included calling politicians "cow[s]" (as in the image above), remarked on facial features such as their noses and said a woman's "face-lift is failing".

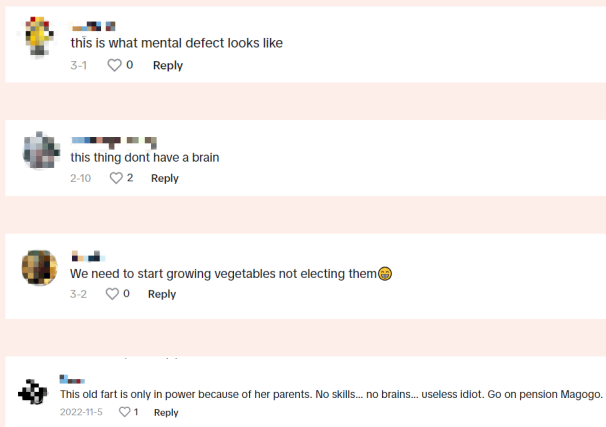
These attacks on women politicians' age and physical attributes are rooted in misogynistic ideas that put women in certain boxes, pit women against each other, and suggest that only women who look and act a certain way or are a certain age are worthy of respect.

2 Attacks on competency and/or intelligence

Many comments in ISD's sample discredited the women politicians' abilities to do their job, primarily by attacking their intelligence, abilities and qualifications. Users frequently described them as "useless woman", "good for fuck all", "irrelevant liar", "joke" and "idiot". While some of these terms may not be inherently misogynistic on their own, they are often weaponised against women to further harmful gendered stereotypes. These attacks are also commonly made in conjunction with other abusive language, particularly based on age.

Some remarks drew on universally-recognised misogynistic tropes to insult candidates; these included telling them to "come clean my house" or "gaan terug kombuis toe waar jy hoort", which translates from Afrikaans to "go back to the kitchen where you belong". These misogynistic tropes insinuate that a woman's place in the world is being a housewife or taking care of her family, not politics. Other tropes required knowledge of the South African context: for example, comments under several videos wrote "this is what you get with a 30% pass

Figures 7 – 10: Comments attacking competency and intelligence, playing into the stereotype and trope that women are unfit to lead.



rate” or simply “30%”. This references the viral narrative that pass marks for some exams in the country were set at 30 percent to imply that the women politicians are uneducated.^{50, 51}

Some comments were particularly egregious, describing the women as “vegetables” and “thing[s]” who lack brains and have mental defects. These attacks play on a trope which paints women as inherently unintelligent and unqualified for leadership roles, while masculine characteristics are portrayed as vital for strong leadership.⁵²

3 Gendered disinformation

Both the videos and their comment sections often amplified viral narratives that mocked women politicians or candidates for a variety of reasons, such as an out-of-context public statement or an unflattering picture from a certain angle. TikTok’s policies allow legitimate critical comments about public figures to a certain extent, but analysts found that videos offering legitimate criticism often drew in harmful or misogynistic comments or amplified entirely false gendered narratives.

The most notable example was the case of Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams, the current Minister of Small Business Development, who was accused by South Africa’s Sunday Independent in 2020 of using taxpayer money to fund an anniversary trip to Switzerland. Due to the outrage online, Ndabeni-Abrahams released a statement fact-

checking the article and explaining how her actions were not a violation of the policies in the Ministerial Handbook, which all ministers in South Africa must abide by.⁵³ However, analysts still found videos spreading the false claims made in the Sunday Independent four years later, with comments also personally attacking Ndabeni-Abrahams, her appearance and her ability to be a leader.

This example highlights how social media companies still do not always have control on the spread of gendered disinformation on their platforms and lack specific policies or statements to address and prevent it. These narratives can lead to further hate speech or harmful content, as evidenced in a video highlighting the news of Ndabeni-Abrahams’ divorce in 2023. Although some comments rehashed the story from the Sunday Independent, others expanded their attacks, commenting that Ndabeni-Abrahams was “for the streets” and wondering whether this news “make her now available for a bonk?”⁵⁴ Nothing in the comment prompted these highly sexualised and objectifying comments about Ndabeni-Abrahams.

To understand whether TikTok has taken proactive measures to protect South African women on its platform, ISD analysts also looked at which abusive keywords in South African vernacular were restricted or blocked from the platform. Analysts compared these results to Instagram, which has similar features as TikTok. Analysts found TikTok had pre-emptively restricted the most offensive keywords or hashtags. 25 percent (3 out of 12) South Africa-specific keywords and hashtags in English or Afrikaans were blocked or restricted. On Instagram, however, only the one English-language hashtag and the term “cunt” were blocked (used by analysts as a control term), leaving all the others searchable.

Keyword	Meaning	Instagram	TikTok
1 sefebe	bitch	Searchable	Searchable
2 slat	bitch	Searchable	Searchable
3 magosha or makgosa	sex worker, derogatory	Searchable	Searchable
4 o lahlile	“loose” or “cheap” woman	Searchable	Searchable
5 wasplank	used to body shame women	Searchable	Searchable
6 ke monna	used to body shame women	Searchable	Searchable
7 sekobo	“looking ugly” (formal word)	Searchable	Searchable
8 befile	“looking ugly” (formal word)	Searchable	Searchable
9 #womenaretrash	response to #menaretrash movement in South Africa	Blocked	Blocked
10 kwere kwere	targets migrants, derogatory	Searchable	Searchable
11 poes	cunt	Searchable	Blocked
12 puss	cunt, variation of poes	Searchable	Blocked
13 cunt	English-language term	Blocked	Blocked

Table 2: A comparison between Instagram and TikTok showing which gendered abusive terms in South African vernacular are restricted or blocked on the platform. Term 13, which is used globally, was used as a control by analysts to showcase the difference in English-language moderation v. non-English moderation.

Case Studies

Case Study 2: X Posts and Replies

Methodology

ISD first expanded the list of names of former or current high-profile politicians or candidates used for the TikTok case study to 52 names across 6 parties (as well as 2 independent candidates). Using social media analytics tool Brandwatch, analysts set up a search query for the 52 names (and spelling variations) as well as mentions of their X accounts. Analysts downloaded all X posts mentioning their names or accounts, removing any retweets, covering a period from 20 February to 3 June 2024. The relevant data covered 36,000 X posts.

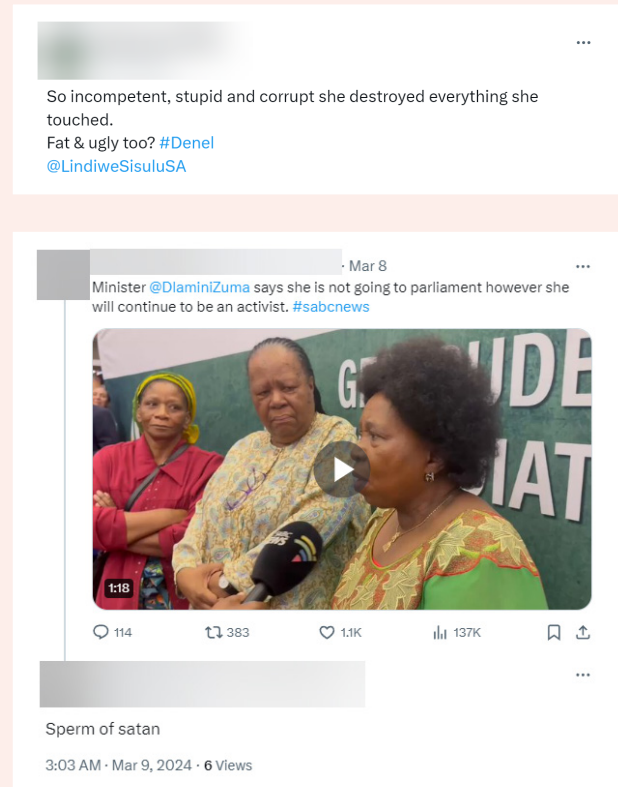
Analysts repeated the exact same search query, this time using the “AND” Boolean function to add the list of keywords in South African vernacular and English often used to target or degrade women. After removing spam posts, the search query yielded 114 X posts. Analysts then qualitatively analysed these posts.

Findings

Much like TikTok comments in the previous case study, analysts found that the 114 X posts in the data set largely deployed demographic-based attacks, targeting the appearance and age of the women candidates and politicians. Of the 114 posts, the word most used to degrade and harass women was “fat”, which was used in 30 X posts. The second was “ugly”, and the third was “Satan”. On some occasions, these words were used in combination with the word “bitch”. While the words fat, ugly and Satan may not be gendered insults on their own, ISD has previously highlighted how women in politics face more abuse related to their physical appearance than their male counterparts.⁵⁵ Some women with intersectional identities may also face a mix of abuse – misogyny and racism, or misogyny and homophobia, for example. The International Center for Journalists has highlighted how women journalists were labelled “Satan” by the Economic Freedom Fighters’ leader, Julius Malema. Following this, his supporters and followers used the term to further target other women public figures.⁵⁶ Therefore, in the South African context, it is possible the term “Satan” has become a gendered one used to attack women online.

Like comments in TikTok, posts in the final dataset also used a mix of English and other languages. Interviews with local experts suggested that this is common for online South African culture, where users talk to each other in a mix of languages. It is worth noting that although ISD used a list of both English-language and South African

Figures 11 – 12: Comments degrading Lindiwe Sisulu and calling Dlamini-Zuma a “sperm of Satan”.



Name	Party	Mentions
Mbali Thuli	Former DA	6634
Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams	ANC	5761
Mmamoloko Kubayi	ANC	4297
Omphile Maotwe	EFF	3395
Helen Nonhlanhla Makhuba	IFP	2401
Patricia De Lille	GOOD	2355
Anele Mda	Independent	2039
Dlamini Zuma	ANC	1954
Siviwe Gwarube	DA	1790
Emma Louise Powell	DA	1127

■ **Tables 3 – 4:** On the top, the 10 former or current women politicians or candidates with the most mentions from ISD's data collection, without the hateful keywords included in the search. Below, the same but with the hateful keywords included in the search.

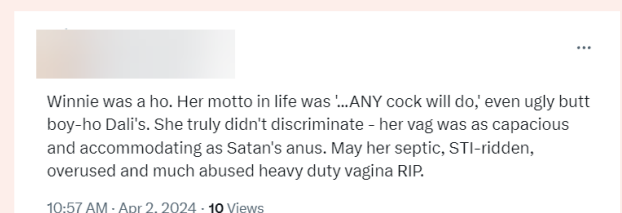
vernacular keywords used to attack women in the data collection, most of the X posts in the final sample were in English as analysts removed posts from the dataset that were entirely in other languages to avoid mistranslations. Therefore, we cannot speak to the platform's effectiveness in moderating content in other South African languages.

Out of the 114 X posts, 108 were replies to content from the women politicians or mentioning them, whereas only seven were original posts. This is unsurprising: ISD has observed throughout the research conducted for this report that users are more likely to be abusive or harass women politicians in the comment sections or replies under popular posts. However, analysts did not find that replies were necessarily more abusive than the original posts: the seven original posts used terms such as "old bitch", "poes" and "witch".

ISD analysts also found that, much like TikTok, most of the X posts containing abusive language targeted women affiliated with the ANC (7 out of the top 10). Only 3 out of the top 10 most mentioned women politicians or candidates in the full data collection were affiliated with the ANC (Table 3). This suggests a higher concentration of abusive X posts targeting women in the ANC. For example, Khumbudzo Ntshavheni, Minister in the Presidency of the ANC, faced the second-highest number of abusive posts in the 114 X post sample (13 out of 114) but was not amongst the top 10 women politicians or candidates mentioned. This may also be in part due to anti-incumbency against the ANC as the party that has led South Africa for 30 years.

Name	Party	Mentions
Mmamoloko Kubayi	ANC	19
Khumbudzo Ntshavheni	ANC	13
Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams	ANC	13
Omphile Maotwe	EFF	13
Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma	ANC	11
Lindiwe Sisulu	ANC	10
Patricia de Lille	GOOD	6
Siviwe Gwarube	DA	5
Gwen Ramokgopa	ANC	4
Maropene Ramokgopa	ANC	3

Figure 13: When analysing posts in the dataset, analysts found posts that targeted women outside of ISD's original list.



The woman who received the most hate was Mmamoloko Kubayi, Minister of Human Settlements and affiliated with the ANC. Users targeted Kubayi's physical appearance, intelligence and competency. This could be due to Kubayi's role as a Minister, which covers topics that were highly contentious in the 2024 election, namely immigration. Either way, in X posts after the election, users celebrated that Kubayi was "NOT coming back", calling her a "bloody arrogant bitch" and a "fat fuck".

Additionally, several of the X posts in the dataset targeted and abused other South African women who were not in ISD's original list. One notable example is Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, anti-apartheid activist and ex-wife of former President Nelson Mandela, who died in 2018. Posts made by Ntshavheni and Maropene Ramokgopa, ANC's 2nd Deputy Secretary General, honouring Madikizela-Mandela's memory on 2 April received several cases of gendered abuse. One user in the replies called Madikizela-Mandela a "sefebe", a South African slang word equivalent to "slut". Another user called Madikizela-Mandela a "septic, STI-ridden" woman who was a "ho" and used other vulgar descriptions and insults, under both Ntshavheni and Ramokgopa's posts. As of 25 June 2024, none of the replies were removed by X. Analysts also found that journalist Verashni Pillay became a target in conversations about Siviwe Gwarube of the DA.

Case Studies

Case Study 3: Facebook Comment Sections

Methodology

ISD analysts gathered the names and Facebook profiles of women candidates for the five leading political parties in South Africa – the Democratic Alliance, African National Congress, Economic Freedom Fighters, Freedom Front Plus and Inkatha Freedom Party. When choosing who to include in the analysis, analysts focused on women in high profile positions in the parties, such as ministers or leaders of women’s groups within their parties.

Analysts also gathered data about the numbers of “friends” and/or followers each of the women had on Facebook and ranked them according to these numbers. The women with the top ten highest follower count were included in the analysis. Because almost all candidates use Facebook profiles, as opposed to Pages, social listening tools such as CrowdTangle could not be used for this analysis. Additionally, as the lack of data access made it difficult to analyse comments at scale, ISD analysts manually reviewed comments left on all posts published on the 10 profiles between 20 May and 3 June 2024 for the presence of OGBV. If the profile did not have any posts

published during this period, the five most recent posts were instead chosen for analysis.

Findings

ISD manually reviewed 1,881 comments left on 244 posts across the 10 Facebook profiles and found no evidence of OGBV. In fact, analysts found that comments were overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the women. Although ISD analysts found some negative comments as well as claims and accusations about candidates and political parties, there was a lack of gendered language among these comments.

On the surface, the results of this analysis are positive, in that there was a distinct lack of OGBV found within the comment sections of some of the most high-profile women politicians. This only tells part of the story, however. Experts in interviews with ISD mentioned that bad actors often utilize Facebook to spread hateful commentary within their private circles, and that those posts are often screenshotted and reposted to X where they reach a wider audience and go viral.

Name	Party	Followers	Posts	Comments
Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams	African National Congress	62587	5	40
Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma	African National Congress	56000	8	36
Mmamoloko Kubayi	African National Congress	22000	32	79
Nomvula Mokonyane	African National Congress	19138	5	81
Jane Sithole	Democratic Alliance	12000	40	781
Gwen Ramokgopa	African National Congress	11000	26	88
Rebecca Mamaila Mohlala	Economic Freedom Fighters	11000	56	86
Pinky Kekana	African National Congress	9200	8	78
Maropene Ramokgopa	African National Congress	6900	36	395
Samantha Graham	Democratic Alliance	4900	28	217

■ Table 5: Women candidates included in Facebook analysis and number of posts and comments analysed.

Additionally, a lack of data access to analyse Facebook comment sections at scale means that researchers are unable to quantify the scale of abuses within Facebook comment sections. Without meaningful access to this data, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this analysis.

While reviewing the Facebook comments, ISD noted some inconsistencies in the number of comments a post said it had and the number of comments displayed when the “all comments” option was chosen. These inconsistencies could be a sign that profile owners and admins either hid or deleted some comments so they would no longer be displayed. In other instances, some profiles restricted those who could comment to followers and/or friends. This may be an indication that candidates were taking proactive measures to limit the likelihood of harmful and abusive comments being left on their Facebook profiles. Once again, without access to the data held by Facebook on these kinds of interventions, it is difficult to conclude that the platform is more effective than others at tackling OGBV or other harms targeting its users.

Secondly, this highlights the role of platform design and functionality in the facilitation or mitigation of online harms such as OGBV. On the one hand, platform functionality can empower users to self-moderate and curate online spaces by removing harmful content, such as OGBV (although platforms should be responsible for removing content that violates their policies and not put the work on their users). This follows the logic of a victim-survivor Safety by Design approach, which encourages platforms to build safety into the design, development and deployment of their features.⁵⁷ On the other hand, these accounts belong to high profile politicians during an electoral campaign, and public debate should not be censored or infringed, to ensure informed voter decision making. Specifically for public figures, platforms should facilitate public scrutiny of self-moderation. Again, this comes back to the lack of data access and transparency given by Facebook and other platforms, not just to understand the harms facing users, but also to facilitate a free and fair online debate and ensure electoral integrity.

Once again, without access to the data held by Facebook on these kinds of interventions, it is difficult to conclude that the platform is more effective than others at tackling OGBV or other harms affecting its users.

Policy Recommendations

Given the findings of this report, ISD proposes a set of policy recommendations to the South African Government, online platforms and services to combat online gendered abuse, disinformation, harassment, and hate.

Recommendations for the Government of South Africa:

- **The newly implemented National Council on Gender Based-Violence and Femicide should include OGBV in its remit and reporting.** The Council is a commendable effort to address GBV in South Africa. However, OGBV is not addressed, despite an increasing evidence base of OGBV perpetrated against women in politics and other public-facing roles. This report details OGBV facing women candidates during elections, and the potential chilling effect this can have on democratic life in South Africa. OGBV is a subset of GBV, both which are deeply rooted in misogynistic structures and norms in a society. Both require a holistic approach to address these problems, as laid out in the Act. OGBV has tangible and measurable offline impacts, and offline harms can be extended and amplified online.⁵⁸ To holistically address GBV and femicide in South Africa, the Council should therefore include OGBV within its remit and national strategy.
- **Appropriate resourcing must be ensured alongside the implementation of the existing legal framework.** South Africa has a comprehensive legal framework on elections, online harms and GBV. This is anchored in the 1996 Constitution which is considered one of the most progressive in the world. However, there are significant gaps in the enforcement of these laws, as well as in citizen awareness and empowerment to utilise existing legal remedies for protection and find redress against OGBV. Partnering with community-based organisations to deliver awareness-raising campaigns is crucial. These campaigns must clearly communicate the nature of OGBV, the available legal protections and the reporting mechanisms to help victims seek redress and protection effectively.
- **A comprehensive, whole-of-society approach is required to effectively address OGBV in South Africa, including the development of inclusive educational programmes.** This approach should consider the country's digital divide and diverse population, including rural communities, older individuals and those with lower digital literacy. As ISD found through interviews with experts, OGBV is often worse in private online spaces (such as private messaging chats, channels and groups). Public awareness of what constitutes OGBV and other online harms is necessary to empower victim-survivors and their support networks to be able to recognise, report and/or support.
- **The Government, in collaboration with the National Council on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide, civil society and community organisations, should:**
 - **Develop inclusive educational programmes:** Create and implement educational initiatives that cover OGBV and other internet-related harms. These programmes should be tailored to the unique needs and concerns of the whole population including rural communities, older adults and individuals with lower digital literacy levels. This could include digital literacy workshops, easy-to-understand guides on identifying and reporting OGBV, and support services for victims.
 - **Create, develop and deploy better reporting systems of OGBV for women, and roll out specialist training for law enforcement and other social safety stakeholders on providing trauma-informed support for victims of OGBV and hate crimes.** Government should also consider partnering with community-based organisations to deliver awareness-raising campaigns that clearly communicate what these types of violence are and how to report it.
- **The FPB, as the media regulator, should provide public-facing clarification of its role in removing unclassified, prohibited or potentially prohibited content, particularly concerning OGBV.** This should be framed within its mandate as established by the FPB Amendment Act. While the public can report incidents to the FPB, these reporting mechanisms need to be more widely publicised and made easily accessible. To achieve this, the FPB should:
 - **Increase transparency:** Clearly define and

communicate the FPB's responsibilities and processes in the removal of potentially prohibited content, including how it addresses reports of OGBV. This should include further details on the FPB's process for interpreting constitutional limits to freedom of expression when addressing prohibited content.

- **Increase awareness:** More widely publicise the availability of reporting mechanisms.
 - **Improve accessibility:** Ensure that reporting mechanisms are user-friendly and accessible to all individuals, including those with limited digital literacy or access.
- **Ensure that policies create a minimum required level of platform transparency via appropriate, standardised processes.** A lack of transparency on platform processes, such as content moderation and lack of access to platform data, creates a challenge for independent researchers to assess the nature, scope and scale of online harms faced by South Africans. The Government should take the following measures to address the current gap in platform accountability and transparency:
 - **Facilitate data access for researchers:** Require platforms to provide standardised access to already public data for public interest researchers. This would enable more comprehensive analysis of platform practices, the online safety of users, and the nature and scale of online harms such as OGBV. This would also foster a more comprehensive evidence base to inform policy making and mitigation measures to address OGBV and other online harms.
 - **Promote transparency in content moderation policies:** Oblige platforms to clearly disclose their content moderation policies, practices and the criteria used for decision-making, such as in annual transparency reports. Also consider mandating transparency on content moderation capacities in different languages. This transparency will help users, researchers, civil society and regulators understand how their content is being managed and provide a basis for holding platforms accountable.

To online platforms and services:

- **Improve bilingual and non-English content moderation.** This requires significant enhancements in both the scope and transparency of their moderation efforts. Online platforms and services should:
 - **Expand multilingual content moderation:** Platforms should commit to moderating content in all 12 official South African languages, recognising the linguistic diversity of users. This includes prioritising the recruitment and training of moderators fluent in these languages and leveraging technological solutions like machine learning to assist in content moderation across multiple languages.
 - **Increase transparency of moderation efforts:** Platforms should provide clear public information on the number and language capabilities of content moderators, ideally in annually published reports. This transparency should extend to the methods used to handle content in less widely spoken languages, including both official and non-official languages commonly used in South Africa.
 - **Develop inclusive moderation policies:** Much OGBV and online harms is based in context-specific culture, norms, vernacular and references. Platforms should create and implement content moderation policies and teams that are inclusive and culturally sensitive. This includes understanding the local context and nuances of language use to better address OGBV and other harmful content effectively.
 - **Collaborate with local experts:** Platforms should consult and collaborate with South African GBV survivors and advocates for gender equality, scholars and survivors with lived experience when developing the methodology for transparency reports or any internal research. Platforms must be transparent about their reporting methodology, ensuring it is informed by those with direct knowledge of the local context and challenges.
- **Develop and standardise reporting transparency reporting efforts on OGBV:**

- **Include gender-disaggregated data:** Platforms should develop enforcement reports that include gender-disaggregated data. This data should detail community guideline violations, such as hate speech, indicating whether the violation was based on gender and other intersecting protected characteristics. This will enable intersectional analysis and provide a clearer picture of how different groups are affected by OGBV.
 - **Standardise reporting efforts:** Platforms should work with each other on cross-platform initiatives to standardise transparency reporting. This effort should align with global work being undertaken by UN Women to develop a statistical framework for technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression's development of a common definition for gendered disinformation.
 - **Apply a victim-survivor-centred Safety by Design approach:**
 - Taking a victim-survivor-centred perspective, the development of user interfaces and tools should apply a gender and trauma-informed lens throughout all stages.
 - Platforms should adopt proactive measures that support user agency with tools that protect their privacy and reduce exposure to OGBV, and accountability measures that deter perpetrators appropriately.
-

Conclusion

This report provided a multi-platform overview of misogynistic and abusive content, gendered disinformation, and harassment targeting prominent South African women in politics. Although South African legal frameworks and social media platform policies should theoretically protect women online, these efforts are hampered by a lack of enforcement from regulators, law enforcement and social media platforms. This conclusion was supported through ISD's findings in interviews with experts, politicians, members of civil society, academia engaging with the South African context, and from conversations with workshop participants.

Preventative measures, especially from social media platforms, were found to be inadequate. For example, ISD found that TikTok only pre-emptively blocked or prevented engagement with misogynistic or abusive terms in English but failed to do so in non-English languages used in South Africa (aside from one term in Afrikaans). Additionally, it is clear both X and TikTok's enforcement of policies slip when it comes to comment sections (particularly when the comment uses a mix of South African vernaculars). ISD found several egregious replies and comments targeting South African women in politics across the platforms. Despite concerns from civil society, social media platforms still seem unaware of how to address the growing problem of gendered disinformation, which is less direct than gendered abuse but can still have negative effects.

This report only provided a small snapshot of the egregious content prominent South African women in politics face online. The research for this report was primarily conducted in English, thus missing out on much of the content posted in non-English languages used in South Africa. It also did not cover other major social media sites used by South Africans such as WhatsApp or Instagram; WhatsApp in particular is more complicated to conduct research on without a reporting mechanism or extensive network due to the private, closed nature of the platform. ISD also had to narrow the focus of the report to a selection of prominent women in politics across the major parties in South Africa due to the sheer number of women candidates and politicians at the regional and national level. It is likely that South African women, and not just in politics, face even more abuse online than documented throughout this report.

Online gendered abuse and disinformation has a ripple effect on entire societies. A 2022 global survey by Ipsos highlighted how one in three men believe gender equality activism does more harm than good, while 36 percent of men think women “overreact” to things that people send or say to women online.⁵⁹ These narratives invalidate or diminish what women share about their personal experiences online or deter them from sharing them at all: 32 percent of women who responded to the Ipsos global survey reported they have stopped themselves from sharing what they think online after facing online abuse. This chilling effect, which has been extensively documented in the post-COVID-19 online landscape, threatens to set back the work of activists, community organisers, journalists, politicians, and others who have fought for equality and women's rights in South Africa and beyond.⁶⁰

Gendered disinformation, hateful speech, misogynistic abuse and attacks specifically against women in politics is a devastating impediment to democratic societies, threatening progress on diversity and representation in politics. This is evidenced by reports of women around the world stepping back from election campaigns because of online abuse and harassment.⁶¹ A 2019 BBC article highlighted how women MPs were stepping down from their roles due to the incessant abuse they faced online and offline.⁶²

Online gendered abuse and disinformation is inextricably connected to negative offline effects, too. A 2017 survey by Amnesty International revealed that 55 percent of women who experienced online abuse or harassment experienced stress, anxiety, or panic attacks after the fact. Research from the Inter-Parliamentary Union on violence against women members of 50 African parliaments similarly highlighted the intersection between gendered harassment and offline sexual and physical violence against women parliamentarians.⁶³ Many parliamentarians experienced gendered abuse on- and offline, as well as experiences that blurred the line between on- and offline, such as online threats of physical violence (42 percent of those surveyed). Physical attacks against women politicians, such as the 2021 plot to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, a US governor, have also been linked to gendered disinformation and harassment online.⁶⁴

Encouragingly, every main party in the 2024 South African elections included GBV as a priority in

their party manifestos. But, with the results of the elections propelling the country's government into an unprecedented 10-party coalition, it is more important than ever to not let the issue of GBV and OGBV fall down the list of political priorities. It is likely OGBV will only be amplified by increasingly widely-accessible technologies such as generative AI, deepfakes and "cheap fakes".⁶⁵ Already, women in politics globally are being targeted by nonconsensual intimate images of their bodies – some created with generative AI, others created with more simple technology such as Photoshop.⁶⁶ South African women in politics have also been targeted with these "cheap fakes" attempting to delegitimise their work and impact, such as the case of a viral doctored image of South African advocate and anti-apartheid activist Thuli Madonsela posing in an apartheid-era flag dress with former apartheid-era president F.W. de Klerk.⁶⁷

With social media platforms backsliding on their own policies, enforcement and/or transparency, the resources to adequately support and protect women online may be unavailable. Online attacks against women in politics, journalism or academia could even become profitable content. Without support and transparent resources from the government, women may feel like they have no one to turn to for justice. The cycle of harm affects not just the women who are attacked but democracy itself, having a chilling effect on human rights.

Appendix

Appendix A: List of keywords used for TikTok and X case studies

Below are various English-language and South African vernacular slangs, insults, or slurs that target women. Variations of lists of these words were used for the various case studies.

sefebe
cunt
poes
whore
makghosha (OR magosha OR makgosa)
slut
stupid woman
bitch
o lahlile
witch
wasplank
thot
ke monna
skank
sekobo
satan
befile
ugly
puss
fat

Appendix B: List of names of women used for TikTok, X and Facebook case studies

Below is a list of the names of prominent South African women in politics used for TikTok, X and Facebook case studies, including which political party they are affiliated with (if any). Variations of lists of these names were used based on the methodology for each case study. Due to various limitations, the full list was not used for TikTok and Facebook.

Name	Party
Sisisi Tolashe	African National Congress
Nomvula Mokonyane	African National Congress
Maropene Ramokgopa	African National Congress
Stella Ndabeni-Abrahams	African National Congress
Gwen Ramokgopa	African National Congress
Mmamoloko Kubayi	African National Congress
Khumbudzo Ntshavheni	African National Congress
Thembi Nkademeng	African National Congress
Pinky Kekana	African National Congress
Tandi Mahambehlala	African National Congress
Bernice Swarts	African National Congress
Phumzile Mgcina	African National Congress
Thandi Moraka	African National Congress
Pemmy Majodina	African National Congress
Ronalda Nalumango	African National Congress
Bertha Peace Mabe	African National Congress
Nomalungelo Gina	African National Congress
Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma	African National Congress
Lindiwe Sisulu	African National Congress
Jane Sithole	Democratic Alliance
Glynnis Breytenbach	Democratic Alliance
Siviwe Gwarube	Democratic Alliance
Natasha Mazzone	Democratic Alliance
Cathlene Labuschagne	Democratic Alliance
Dianne Kohler Barnard	Democratic Alliance
Bridget Masango	Democratic Alliance
Angel Khanyile	Democratic Alliance

Tsholofelo Bodlani	Democratic Alliance
Emma Louise Powell	Democratic Alliance
Michéle Clarke	Democratic Alliance
Mimmy M Gondwe	Democratic Alliance
Alexandra Abrahams	Democratic Alliance
Samantha Graham	Democratic Alliance
Ciska Jordaan	Democratic Alliance
Poppy Mailola	Economic Freedom Fighters
Zovuyo Veronica Mente	Economic Freedom Fighters
Omphile Maotwe	Economic Freedom Fighters
Tshilidzi Annikie Maraga	Economic Freedom Fighters
Rebecca Mamaila Mohlala	Economic Freedom Fighters
Reneiloe Mashabela	Economic Freedom Fighters
Marcelle Maritz	Freedom Front Plus
Rochelle Robbetze	Freedom Front Plus
Tamarin Breedt	Freedom Front Plus
Heloise Denner	Freedom Front Plus
Amanda De Lange	Freedom Front Plus
Patricia de Lille	GOOD
Anele Mda	Independent
Faith Ntakadzeni Phathela	Independent
Thembeni Petty Mthethwa	Inkatha Freedom Party
Phumzile Buthelezi	Inkatha Freedom Party
Helen Nonhlanhla Makhuba	Inkatha Freedom Party
Liezl van der Merwe	Inkatha Freedom Party
Mbali Ntuli	None, formerly Democratic Alliance

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