

Analysis of Gendered Violence in Media Against Women in Politics in Nepal



1. INTRODUCTION

Since October 2021, Panos South Asia (PSA) embarked on identifying some of the negative elements that are contributing to weakening information ecology and undermining democratic rights in Nepal. This initiative is aimed at identifying the phenomena of misinformation and disinformation, using a gender sensitive lens to locate examples of misogyny in the online public sphere, helping to better understand the latest trends and techniques of online manipulations as well as the means to tackle it so that citizens can receive the necessary facts to make more informed political choices.

This project has been initiated to address these pressing issues regarding the accelerated power of the digital environment, where online gendered hate speech and deliberate distortion of facts have become widespread. The program is directed towards addressing the core issues that can enter the electoral process and intimidate women leading to their eventual withdrawal from the political sphere.

Although online platforms are an important source in helping women overcome barriers to becoming politically active, they can also be a forum for dis/misinformation, hate speech, abuse and harassment. Violence and abuse can create a hostile online environment by serving to shame, intimidate, and degrade women. The impact of 'silencing them out' of politics can be anonymous, borderless, sustained and permanent. The perception of impunity can often serve to embolden perpetrators and increase a sense of insecurity and violation in the minds of women. Overall, online violence against women in politics serves to subvert democratic tenets and can have a 'chilling effect' on the ambitions of young women and new entrants to the political arena.

The PSA conducted a Rapid Needs Assessment to examine and understand gender norms and other cleavages that are susceptible to hate speech, dis/

misinformation, and other harmful forms of online manipulation during elections. The assessment established the consequences of hate speech, dis/misinformation and online manipulation and its negative effect on the well-being of targeted candidates, negatively impacting on inclusion, diversity and political representation.

The overall aim is to reduce the level of harm caused due to the spread of deliberate lies and hate speech, strengthen the awareness of stakeholders on the multiple negative impacts of dis/misinformation and hate speech around elections and the role that political parties can play in countering such phenomena, and to promote greater accountability and transparency in public life.

This report is the first in a series of reports, which attempts to look at online gendered hate speech targeting women politicians and politically active women with a focus on increasing space and participation of women in elections. It aims to contextualize the research and analysis of data against the backdrop of the increasing digital sphere and discussions around freedom of expression and digital rights. The report combines quantitative and qualitative data taken from a variety of traditional and new media. The research covers the period from 15 November 2021 to 31 January 2022.

Since the Government announced local government elections for 13 May 2022, there have already been indications that the upcoming three sets of elections in Nepal will be fiercely contested and that political parties (and their supporters) may employ whatever means to win, including using digital platforms to spread dis/misinformation in their favor. Given this, the pre-election period will likely see an increase in hate and misogynistic speech targeted at women candidates and spread of dis/misinformation.

Among social media platforms in Nepal, Facebook has the most users followed by Twitter. Other platforms, such as TikTok and Instagram, also have large numbers

of users, although accurate data is hard to obtain. After radio and television, Facebook is the main source of news, according to Nepal Media Survey 2020¹. As of January 2021, 13 million Nepalis (44 percent of the population) use social media, according to Data Reportal², a figure that increased by 3 million (30 percent) from 2020 to 2021.

Social media outlets also have their own set of standards regarding permissible content on their platforms. However, although Facebook, TikTok and Twitter have all issued various sets of guidelines³ against violence and threats of violence, sexual exploitation and abusive behavior and hateful content, content moderation remains a challenge, which often relies on users to flag problematic content.

2. LEGAL AND REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees freedom of expression within “reasonable restrictions”. These restrictions govern expression in the real and digital worlds. These restrictions can be divided into eight categories: national integrity, harmonious relationship among people (religious groups, castes), caste-based discrimination, disrespect of labor, defamation, contempt of court, incitement to an offence, and acts against public decency and morality. These limitations set the boundaries of freedom of information of citizens in the digital spaces as laws that contradict the Constitution can often be challenged in courts.⁴

Laws like the Electronic Transactions Act, 2008, and, other several national policy documents⁵ in principle

guarantee freedom of expression in the digital sphere, they also serve as a broad regulatory framework with provisions for fines and imprisonment for cases of defamation, online speech, and cyber bullying. Therefore, to fulfill the ethos of the constitutional provision on the right to dignity, The Libel and Slander Act, 2016, was approved with penalties for the use of libel with intent to disturb peace, commission of any act with intent to defame women, and for making false accusations with intent to cause injury⁶. However, none of these instruments directly address gendered online hate speech. Digital rights activists also note that the vague and opaque nature leaves legislation open to interpretation and gives the Nepali state the ‘upper hand’ in governing the digital space.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In conducting the research initiative, three core questions were considered:

1. What is the nature of gendered disinformation and online violence against women politicians in traditional and social media?;
2. Who is generating or contributing to gendered hate speech or disinformation in politics?; and
3. How are users interacting with women politicians on social media?

Given the unlimited size of social media, the purposive sampling⁷ technique was used to streamline the research work. This approach was used to select the accounts of women politicians’ active on Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. The same methodology was used to select accounts engaged in online political discourse or with the potential to generate gendered

1 <https://data.sharecast.org.np/nepal-media-survey-2020/>

2 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-nepal/>

3 <https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines?lang=en>; <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies/twitter-rules>; <https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/>

4 http://www.martinchautari.org.np/files/Research-Brief-31_Freedom-of-Expression-in-Nepal-in-the-Digital-World_A-Policy-Review.pdf

5 Including the Digital Nepal Framework 2019; Information Tech-

nology Policy, 2015; National Penal (Code) Act, 2017; Electronic Transactions Rules, 2007; and Information Technology Bill, 2019.

6 Rapid Needs Assessment on Disinformation Vulnerability and Tactics in Nepal.

7 This is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher relies on discretion to choose variables for the sample population and where the sampling process depends on the researcher’s judgment and knowledge of the context.

Sample of Lexicon

| A7 | A | B | C | D | E | F |
|----|---|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| | | Word or Phrase (Nepali) | Possible Variations | Word or Phrase (Roman) | English translation or explanation | Type of online violence |
| 1 | | रन्डी | रण्डी, रंडी, रंठि, रन्ठि, रण्डि | randi | whore | Insults and hate speech |
| 2 | | कुकुर्नी | कुकुर्नी कुकुरनी, कुकुरनी कुकुरनी, कू | kukumi | bitch | Insults and hate speech |
| 3 | | जाठिनी | जाँठीनी, जाँठिनि, जाँठीनी, जाँठीनि | Jathini | woman with pubic hair; it's a casual word of abuse targeted at woman. Jatho or Jatha is used for man and Jathi or Jathini for woman. | Insults and hate speech |
| 4 | | छाउरी | | Chhauri | bitch (female puppy) | Insults and hate speech |
| 5 | | मेया | मेयौं, मेया मेयौं | maiya | young girl; is also used affectionately for young girls by seniors in family. | Sexualized distortion |
| 6 | | भारु | | bhalu | literal meaning is a bear but use to mean whore/prostitute | Sexualized distortion |
| 7 | | छम्मा | | Chhamma | Slang for girlfriend | Insults and hate speech |
| 8 | | बोक्सी | | boksi | witch | Insults and hate speech |
| 9 | | पागल | | Pagal | Insane | Insults and hate speech |
| 10 | | नानी | | nani | little girl; is also used affectionately for young girls by seniors in family. | Insults and hate speech |
| 11 | | महारानी | माहारानी, माहारानि, महारानी, महार | Maharani | queen | Insults and hate speech |
| 12 | | चल्ला | | Challa | chicks | Insults and hate speech |
| 13 | | चुरीफुरी गर्ने | | Churifuri game | arrogant/showing arrogance | Embarrassment and reputational risk |

disinformation and online violence. This initiative monitored five national dailies⁸, three weeklies⁹, seven news websites¹⁰, ten interview programs aired on eight television stations¹¹, the Twitter accounts of 37 women politicians, 102 Facebook public pages of male and female politicians, and influential persons with at least 2,000 followers. A list of 50 Facebook groups with links to political parties, politicians, and influential independent groups was also created and monitored while 20 TikTok accounts, belonging to male and female politicians and activists, and individuals whose posts attract active interactions, were also monitored.

The initiative reviewed qualitative and quantitative data from 15 November 2021 to 31 January 2022.

8 Kantipur, Nagarik, The Kathmandu Post, The Himalayan Times and Annapurna Post.

9 Sanghu, Jana Aastha and Ghatana Ra Bichar.

10 Ratopati, Setopati, Nepal Press, Online Khabar, Pahilo Post, Hamro Kura and Shilapatra

11 Janta Janna Chahanchhan (Prime Time), Yaksha Prashna (Himalaya TV), Bravo Delta Show and Tamosama Jyotirgamaya (API TV), Gbate (Galaxy 4K TV), Hot Seat (Image Channel), Satya Sambad and Yoho Bahas (Yoho TV), Fireside (Kantipur TV), and STV Chat (Sagarmatha Television).

3.1. DATA COLLECTION METHOD

After monitoring the national dailies and weeklies, online media and TV talk shows, misogynistic content was recorded on a database. The content was based on an 80-word lexicon developed on the basis of media monitoring to segregate the data and identify misogynistic content. The lexicon includes words and phrases consistently used to target women in politics. As different social media platforms also play a vital role in both the generation and dissemination of news, the findings from social media were frequently cross-checked against reporting in traditional media.

Selected public Facebook pages and groups were monitored through CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned public insights tool that optimizes the use of public data for research. Facebook pages and groups were pulled and saved in a plain text file where information is separated by comma. Based on the lexicon, keywords were used to search the file. Freely-available data retrieval tools, such as Twitter API and programming language, and Python, were also used to analyze the data on Twitter. In fact, Twitter API was key in collecting tweets from a single user and/or a group of users over a specific period of time. Twitter data was collected at regular intervals and segregated using keyword searches based on the

lexicon. In addition to Facebook posts and Tweets, the use of misogynistic language against politically active women was monitored through Facebook comments and Tweet replies. Data also was manually collected via select TikTok accounts, as automated data collection of this platform is difficult.

Once the relevant content from Twitter, Facebook and TikTok was collected, identified and segregated, the data was coded into the central database by using the methodology designed for coding misogynistic hate speech, which is outlined below.

3.2. CODING MISOGYNISTIC/ HATE SPEECH CONTENT

To determine the nature of online violence and dis/misinformation against women politicians, content was coded into five categories:

- **CATEGORY 1:** Insults and hate speech; casual comments involving insults and hate (e.g., *bitch, prostitute, or widow*);
- **CATEGORY 2:** Embarrassment/reputational risk and serious negative remarks about a woman's character (e.g., *You slept with so and so; and You are someone's mistress*).
- **CATEGORY 3:** Physical threats and remarks threatening a woman with physical violence. (For example, *I will beat you up; or I will rape you*).
- **CATEGORY 4:** Sexualized distortion and insulting remarks containing stereotypes about women's traditional roles. (e.g., *You should get married and bear children; Your place is in the kitchen; and Women should be seen, not heard*).
- **CATEGORY 5:** Undermining of ability and remarks that undermine women's abilities or attribute/link their success to their more powerful friends or relatives. (e.g., *You landed the post because the CEO is your uncle/ friend; You were appointed because of your father's political influence*).

As the coding of data and content rely on the understanding of a coder/media monitor, a mechanism

was developed where a media monitor first entered content/post/comment under one of the five categories. After this, the research team decided whether the categorization was appropriate. Finally, the project manager periodically reviewed all coded content to ensure consistency in data coding.

3.3. LIMITATIONS

Due to limited financial and human resources as well as the broad sphere of the digital space, research and media monitoring activities were limited to a selection of traditional and social media accounts. Five major daily newspapers with the highest circulation, and three major weekly newspapers (that have a history of disseminating misogynistic content) were selected. Popular TV talk shows that feature major political figures, including women, were also selected. Likewise, media monitoring was focused on social media platforms, using a variety of automation tools. However, these tools have their own limitations: most Facebook monitoring tools, like CrowdTangle, only capture data from public pages, and even then, only the posts and not the comments, which limits the ability to capture offending content in closed groups or comments.

4. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The research covers the period from 15 November 2021 to 31 January 2022, which was prior to the announcement of local government elections, providing a snapshot of violence against women in politics. Minimal election-related discourse, in either traditional or social media, was observed. Based on this, please see below the main findings:

In total, 243 cases of misogynistic content targeting women politicians were identified. Of these, 235 appeared on social media, including Facebook, Twitter and TikTok while two cases appeared in the headlines of two news pieces published by two news websites and six appeared in print media. One case was identified in a daily newspaper and five cases were identified

in weekly newspapers. Most weeklies are published in tabloid format and the reporting rarely follows standard journalistic practices, largely ignoring gender sensitivities. No cases of misogynistic content were observed on the TV programs.

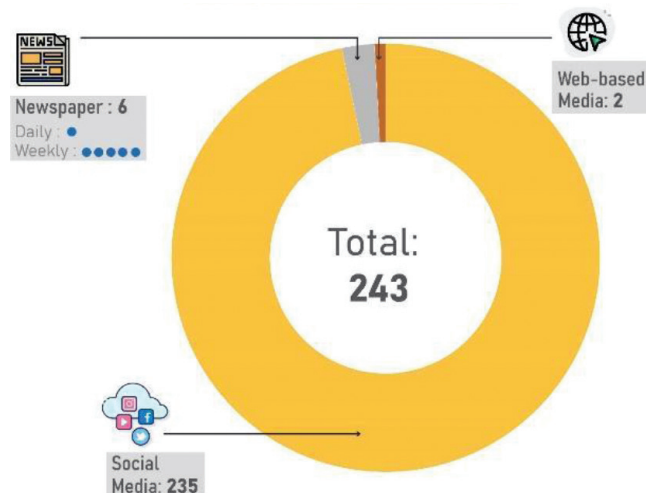
Compared to traditional media, social media is a more common platform for misogynistic content. The social media sphere is sharply divided along partisan lines with users abusing rival party leaders and candidates regardless of gender. Negative comments, verbal abuse, hate speech and trolling by social media users against women politicians is widespread.

Most of the posts and comments containing verbal abuse against women politicians were by social media users with few or no followers and most of them are anonymous. Social media users associated with different political parties tend to have a partisan take on news events and they criticize rival party workers/ politicians/media on social media irrespective of gender. The major politicians that were tracked did not share such posts and content.

In monitoring both posts and comments on Facebook and Twitter, a high number of misogynistic expressions were found in the comments section. When comparing comments on Facebook and Twitter, a higher number of misogynistic expressions were found on Facebook. While comparing posts and tweets [excluding comments], Twitter had a higher number of misogynistic expressions.

While social media users target women politicians due to easy access to the platforms, several newspapers portrayed women politicians as being incapable of independently reaching senior positions. For example, a front-page news story in the weekly newspaper Ghatana Ra Bichar about Padma Aryal, a former minister and a leader of the CPN-UML, stated that she became party secretary in party's 10th General Convention due to her connection to the party's influential leader, Bishnu Paudel. In particular, the report says "As Padma Aryal is

Misogynistic Content in Media



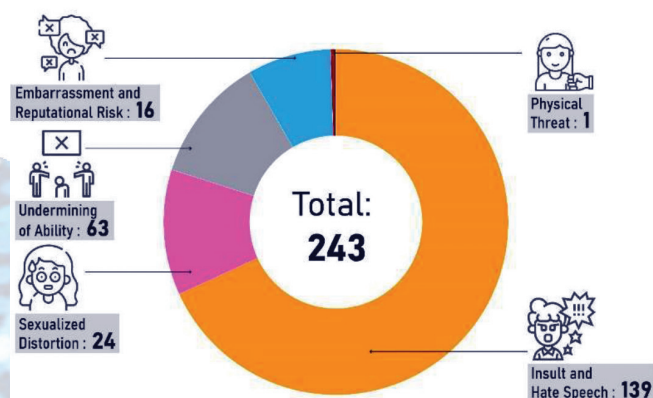
the daughter-in-law of Bishnu Paudel, he pressured party chairman [KP] Oli to give her the position.”

Media monitoring during this period has highlighted that women politicians in government and in positions of power are more likely to be featured in the news, singled out and face online violence compared to their male counterparts. If they are active on social media, then they are more likely to face a barrage of comments, trolling, hate speech, disparaging remarks and online abuse.

Examples of misogynistic comments against prominent women leaders

Nabina Lama, an MP from the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML),

Categorization of Misogynistic Content



Categorization of misogynistic responses to a Facebook post by Nabina Lama



was targeted on her Facebook page for defending her party colleague, the former tourism minister Yogesh Bhattarai. Comments on two posts, drew 866 comments in total¹². Of these, 77 comments on her private Facebook account and 72 comments on her Facebook page involved online violence. Facebook users called her ‘mistress’, janthi [an abusive term for women; meaning woman with pubic hair], ‘prostitute’, and ‘beggar woman’. Many of the insults were targeted at her use of Nepali language. She also received the only instance of physical threat during this period.

A Twitter user spread gendered disinformation against Ram Kumari Jhakri, Minister for Urban Development and Secretary of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist). A speech she made during a visit to her home

¹² 533 on her private Facebook account and 333 on her Facebook page until January 31.

district was quoted out of context in a TikTok clip, which was widely shared on social media. Likewise, she received insulting and disparaging posts and comments on social media for receiving a guard of honor from the police. In the same context, a tweet by a noted writer drew 80 retweets, 19 quote tweets, 1079 likes and 137 comments.

On 19 January, Renu Yadav, Minister for Physical Infrastructure and Transport made a controversial statement while addressing a rally held in Rautahat, Nepal after which she received misogynistic comments including on social media. A Twitter user with over 20,000 followers posted: “One would be fortunate to be the husband of a brave minister like Renu Yadav! If one has a lover of her stature then one would be ready to take any risk! Younger brother [Renu’s husband] was smart enough to have invested in her! Even an old man like me is satisfied! says the neighbor uncle next door.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

The report found Facebook and Twitter to be widely used platforms for propagating misogynistic expressions. Media monitoring during this period highlighted that women politicians in government and in positions of power are more likely to be targets of misogynistic hate speech, trolling and online abuse, more so if they are active on social media. In monitoring Facebook and Twitter, a high number of misogynistic expressions were found in the comments section. When comparing only comments on Facebook and Twitter, a higher number of misogynistic expressions were found on Facebook. While comparing just posts and tweets [excluding comments], the study found that Twitter had a higher number of misogynistic expressions.

As this report found that social media is the most exploited media for propagating misogynistic hate speech compared to the more traditional media, in the

next phase of the research, the focus will be on social media. In particular, the PSA will employ automated data generation tools for data collection and will monitor social media accounts and pages of both male and female politicians in order to conduct a comparative study of online gender violence. Furthermore, the PSA will streamline its data collection and analysis to present a more comprehensive analysis in the next report. This first phase of the process has set the ground for more intensive and streamlined monitoring around online gender-based violence, especially targeting women politicians and politically active women. In particular, the PSA will focus its media monitoring and fact checking of misogynistic online content on the local government elections, scheduled for 13 May 2022, and the provincial and federal elections that will follow.

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