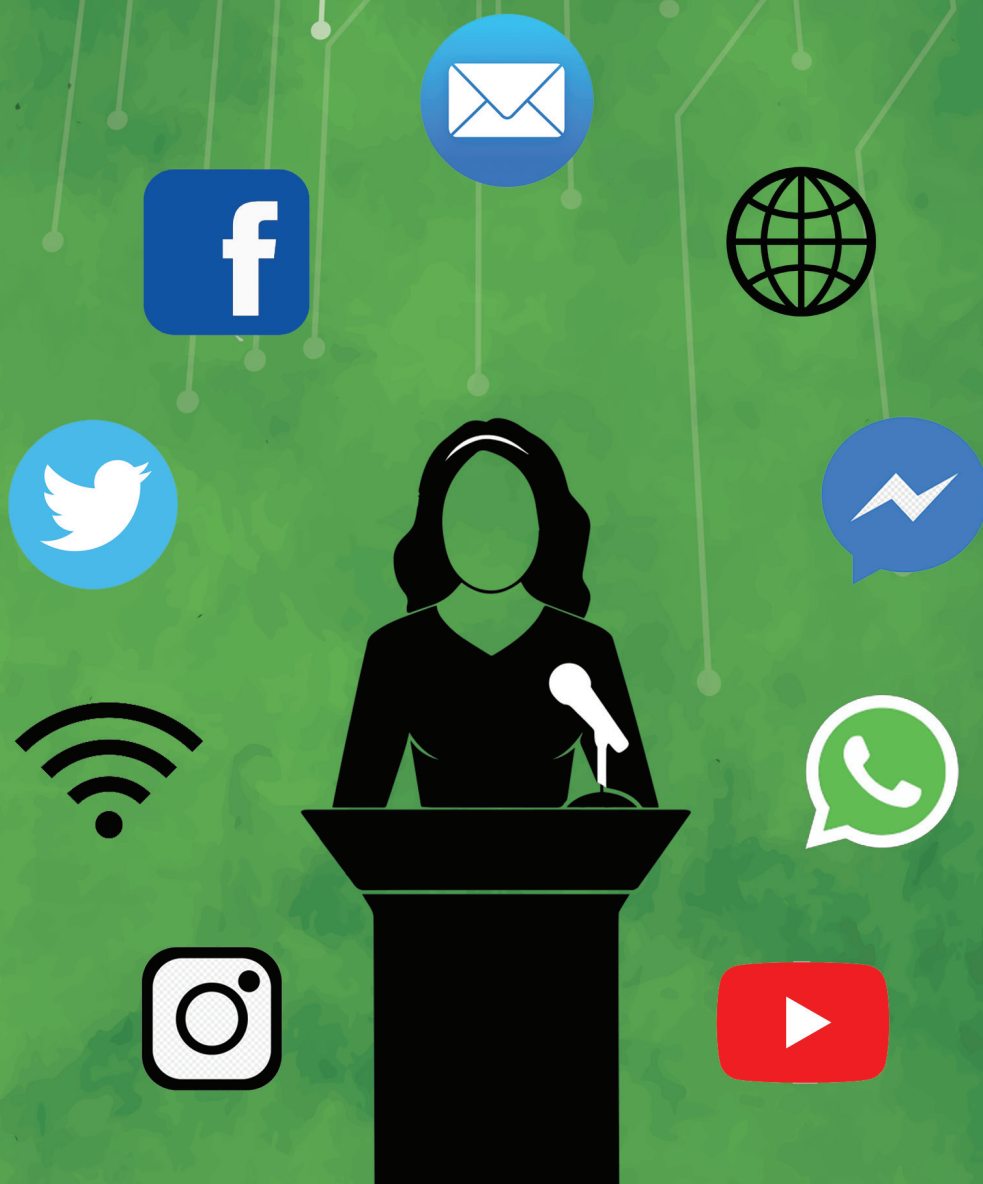


ANALYSIS OF GENDERED VIOLENCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IN NEPAL



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- The number of misogynistic lexicons rose from 80 in the last quarterly report to 136.
 - Major political events attracted a large number of hate speech and misogynistic comments.
 - Most misogynistic expressions were found on the comments/replies section on Facebook and Twitter, but very few of such expressions were found on Facebook posts.
 - Twitter users with few followers and who shared few details on their profile were found to be the main perpetrators, a large number of whom appear to live outside of Nepal.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Since October 2021, Panos South Asia (PSA) has studied the phenomena of dis/misinformation, using a gender sensitive lens to locate online cases of misogyny and to understand the trends and techniques of online manipulation and the means to tackle such phenomena. A further aim has been to address the core issues that can enter the electoral process and serve to intimidate women ultimately leading to their eventual withdrawal from political life.

While social media are important platforms for helping women overcome barriers to political participation, they are also forums for dis/misinformation, hate speech, abuse and harassment. Violence and abuse can help to create a hostile online environment for women by serving to shame, intimidate, and degrade them. The impact of ‘silencing them out’ of the world of politics can also be anonymous, borderless, sustained and often even permanent. The perception of impunity can also often serve to embolden the perpetrators and increase a sense of insecurity and violation in the minds of women. Overall, examples of online violence against women in politics serves to subvert democracy and can have a ‘chilling effect’ on the political ambitions of women.

The Constitution of Nepal guarantees freedom of expression within “reasonable restrictions”. Such limitations set the boundaries of freedom of information for citizens, including in the digital space, as often laws that contradict the Constitution can be challenged in the courts. Legislation, such as the Electronic Transactions Act, Press Council Act, and the National Civil Procedure (Codes) Act as well as other national policy documents should be able to guarantee freedom of expression of persons in the digital sphere while also serving as a

regulatory framework with provisions in place for fines and imprisonment for any cases of defamation, hate speech and cyberbullying when appropriate. To fulfill the constitutional protection of the ‘right to dignity’, the 2016 Libel and Slander Act provides penalties for the use of libel with the intent to disturb the peace, commission of any act with intent to defame women, or make false accusations with the intent of causing injury. Yet, none of these tools adequately address the issue of gendered online hate speech with the vague nature of existing legislation providing the state with the ‘upper hand’ in regard to governing the ‘digital space’.

With regards to social media usage in Nepal, Facebook currently has the most users followed by Twitter with accurate data as to the numbers of users on TikTok and Instagram are hard to obtain. After radio and television, Facebook is the main source of news, as per the Nepal Media Survey 2020,¹ conducted by Sharecast Initiative Nepal. According to DataReportal,² as of January 2022, 13.7 million citizens (45.7 percent of the population) use social media, a figure that has increased by 3.7 million between 2020 to 2021. Although Facebook, TikTok and Twitter all have their own guidelines 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 themselves.

This second report 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 research covers the

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

2 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-nepal?rq=nepal>, accessed on June 20, 2022.

period February 1 to April 30, 2022 and that witnessed the local election campaigns move into full swing. In conducting the research initiative, three key questions were considered: i) What is the nature of gendered disinformation and online violence against women politicians in traditional and social media?; ii) Who is generating or contributing to gendered hate speech or disinformation in politics?; and iii) How are users interacting with women politicians on social media?

2. METHODOLOGY

The number of Nepali women politicians on Twitter is significantly less than those on Facebook. Women politicians who have both Facebook and Twitter accounts are more active on social media compared to those using just one of the two social media platforms. However, those using both the social media platforms simultaneously have been found making generally identical posts on both platforms. Given this reality, different women politicians were selected on Facebook and Twitter and the comments they received on their posts or tweets were duly monitored. The selection was also based on the number of comments they each received to ensure a broad range of political comments.

2.1 Accounts/Pages Monitored

Compared to March and April, the sample size was smaller in February. However, from March onwards, the comments on the social media posts of 25 politically active women were analyzed (10 women on Facebook and 15 Twitter). See Tables 1 and 2.

2.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Using the Purposive Sampling Technique, all comments were analyzed as follows: one Facebook post every two weeks (or two Facebook posts per month) of each of the women politicians; and one tweet per week (or four tweets per month). In doing so, political posts/tweets with the highest number of comments were selected for further analysis. CrowdTangle³ was used to collect Facebook posts from 101 selected public pages and 50 groups. A keyword search was applied using Twint⁴

3 CrowdTangle is a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

4 Twint is a Twitter scraping code in an open source programming language called 'Python'.

for Twitter posts - in all cases using the terms from the previously produced misogynistic hate speech lexicon. All comments/replies on Facebook and Twitter had to be pulled directly from the pages or feeds on which they occurred.

In addition, after the names of candidates for the local elections were announced, to learn more about social media discussions surrounding the most talked about women candidates, PSA conducted a series of searches on Twint and CrowdTangle using the names of four candidates: namely R. Dahal (mayoral candidate for Bharatpur); S. Singh and S. Baskota (mayoral candidates for Kathmandu) and S. Dangol (deputy mayoral candidate for Kathmandu).

All data were stored and analyzed on Microsoft Excel⁵ under the following categories: i) Insult and Hate Speech; ii) Undermining Ability; iii) Embarrassment and Reputational Risk; iv) Sexualized Distortion; and v) Physical Threat.⁶

2.3 Limitations

The following limitations were observed using data scraping on open source tools:

- i. Manual and automated data collection for comments (on Facebook) and replies (on Twitter) remains a challenge, as they are not included in the core platform APIs. As a result, comment/reply suffered from some consistency and formatting issues that complicated analysis; for instance, our tools were not able to pull quote tweets and as a result conversations under all quote tweets were ignored in this study. ;
- ii. CrowdTangle only allows for the monitoring of posts on public Facebook pages and groups and only aggregates 400 Facebook posts at a time;
- iii. Twint, which was used to collect Twitter posts, cannot access locked accounts;
- iv. Lexicon research in Crowdtangle had to be sufficiently narrow and only to select public pages and groups in order to produce relevant results. Keyword searches in the broader CrowdTangle database accumulated too much irrelevant information, particularly because of conflation between Hindi and Nepalese languages.

5 Excel is a data visualization and analysis tool.

6 Details of these categories are included in Section 3.1.2 and examples are presented as word clouds in ANNEX I.

Table 1: List of women politicians selected on Facebook and their political and ethnic representation

Name	Description	Party	Ethnicity
A.R. Deuba	Central Committee	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
N. Lama	House of Representatives	CPN-UML	Tamang
P. Bhusal	Minister for Energy, Water Resources and Irrigation	CPN-MC	Brahmin/Chhetri
P. Singh	Chairperson, All Nepal National Independent Students Union (Revolutionary)	CPN-MC	Brahmin/Chhetri
P. Gautam	Former General Secretary of the Nepal Students Union	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
R.K. Jhakri	Minister for Urban Development	CPN-US	Magar
R. Thapa	Central Committee	RPP	Brahmin/Chhetri
R. Dahal	Mayor of Bharatpur	CPN-MC	Brahmin/Chhetri
S. Khatoon	Former Deputy Mayor of Pokhariya	JSP	Muslim
U. Timsena	Central Committee	CPN-UML	Brahmin/Chhetri

Table 2: List of women politicians selected on Twitter and their political and ethnic representation

Name	Description	Party	Ethnicity
A. KC	Social Welfare Council	CPN-MC	Brahmin/Chhetri
A. Dhakal	Former Central Member, Nepal Students Union	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
A. Thapa	Student leader	CPN-UML	Brahmin/Chhetri
B. Bhattarai	Federal Parliament Member (Lower House)	CPM-UML	Brahmin/Chhetri
D. Sangraula	Central Working Committee	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
D. Adhikari	Member	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
H. Yami	Leader	JSP	Newar
K. Oli	Former member of the National Assembly	CPN-UML	Brahmin/Chhetri
M.Y. Bhattarai	Leader	JSP	Brahmin/Newar
R. Darshana	Former mayoral candidate	Independent (former BSP leader)	Brahmin/Chhetri
S. Baskota	Mayoral candidate, Kathmandu	BSP	Brahmin/Chhetri
S. Shahi	Central Committee	RPP	Brahmin/Chhetri
S. Singh	Mayoral candidate, Kathmandu	NC	Newar
U. Thapa	Deputy Mayor, Nepalgunj	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri
U. Thapaliya	Former member, NSU	NC	Brahmin/Chhetri

v. As some women politicians do not post regularly on their social media accounts, so in such cases the number of posts studied was less.⁷

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1. Untangling misogynistic expressions

A total of 738 posts/comments were flagged as misogynistic content (2.31 percent) during the reporting

⁷ For example, in April 2022, CPN-UML leader and lawmaker B. Bhattarai and NC leader D. Sangraula who are on Twitter did not post any tweets.

period, see Figure 1.⁸ Our study shows that the majority of misogynistic expressions occurred on Tweet replies and Facebook comments and not in the original posts. This indicates that comments/ replies should be seen as the vectors of harassment than posts in the Nepalese social media context. As social media platforms provide

⁸ While interpreting the number of posts/comments analyzed, it should be noted that the sample size in February was smaller as only the social media of six politically active women were studied. The sample size was later increased to 10 women on Facebook and 15 on Twitter in March considering the pending local government elections and the experience gained by project staff to that point. Therefore, the size and subjects of the sample were the same in March and April.

Table 3: Analysis of social media posts/comments:

Task Performed	Comments/Posts Analyzed	Misogynistic Comments/Posts Found
Facebook Comments	17662	493
Facebook Posts	5877	4
Tweet Replies	3167	181
Tweets	5225	60
Grand Total	31931	738

anonymity and are borderless, the perception of impunity emboldens perpetrators to spread misogynistic hate speech to make women feel insecure and violated. Their objective is to silence women and discourage them from engaging in mainstream public and political life.

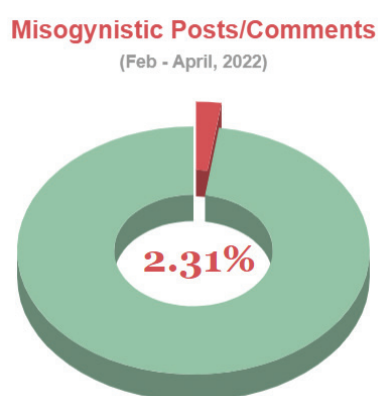


Figure 1: Misogynistic content in social media study

3.1.1 Nature of misogynistic content

In total, 433 (58.7 percent) flagged content involved insults and hate speech that involved casual insults and abuse targeted at women. The second highest number – 151 (20.5 percent) - involved ‘undermining of a person’s ability’, for example, remarks that denigrate women as

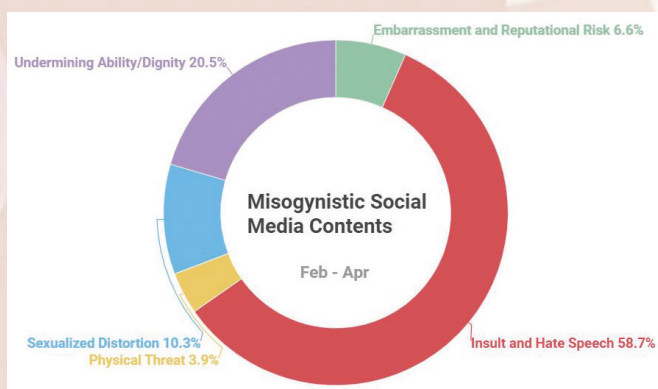


Figure 2: Categories of misogynistic content

intellectually inferior, linking their success to powerful friends or relatives. After these, came remarks of a sexualized distortion involving insulting statements that stereotype women in traditional roles 76 (10.3 percent). 49 (6.6 percent) of all remarks contained comments involving embarrassment and reputational risk’ - serious negative remarks about a woman’s character with the least number of expressions containing physical threats - 29 (3.9 percent). See Figure 2.

3.1.1.1 Insults and hate speech

Insults and hate speech were the most common form of attacks made on women politicians. All of the women politicians covered in this study regularly received negative comments such as ‘shameless’, ‘base woman’, ‘mad woman’, ‘traitor woman’, ‘whore’, ‘prostitute’, ‘witch’, ‘shut up you bitch’, ‘rest in peace, you rascal woman’, ‘suck my cock’ and ‘opportunist woman’. For example, in the run-up to the local elections, CPN-MC leader A. KC on April 4 tweeted “*They say people have decided this time, that they will vote for the Maoist Centre.*” Reacting to the tweet, a user commented “*We’ll cast our votes into your vagina.*” Similarly, on April 4, JSP leader H. Yami, who is a former Maoist leader, tweeted two of her pictures in traditional Gurung attire with the caption “*My first visit to touristic village Ghandruk in Pokhara ...in Gurung attire...Chhyajolo!*” with one user commenting “*You look like a witch*”. In February, during the debate over the ratification of the Millenium Challenge Corporation (MCC), Minister R. K. Jhakri supported the grant and was accused by social media users of ‘selling out the country’. She was called a ‘traitor’ and ‘prostitute’.

3.1.1.2 Undermining of ability

Most women politicians were seen as outsiders and those with less experience were dismissed as lacking political acumen. K. Oli (CPN-UML), R. Thapa (RPP), S. Singh (NC) and R. Dahal (CPN-MC) were among those

receiving the most misogynistic comments. Oli is a singer while Thapa is an actress and filmmaker with both joining politics a few years ago. Singh, the NC's mayoral candidate in Kathmandu, is the wife of leader P.M. Singh while Dahal, the mayoral candidate for Bharatpur, is the daughter of Maoist party leader Prachanda. In April Thapa posted on Facebook that she would act against party workers who do not perform their duties, with one Facebook user reacting *"It seems you are bragging a bit, but politics is not like movies. Although they say only two things work—either Rekha's influence or erotic exposures. Let's see what happens."* Another user reacted *"Making political statements is not like delivering movie scripts by rote...nobody believes you slave woman...as a performer, drawing a crowd might be easy but don't think the entire crowd supports you. Wake up."* Dahal was also seen by her opponents as nothing more than a beneficiary of her father with one Facebook user observing *"Last time you got the opportunity because you are Prachanda's daughter. But this time you will have to fight on your own..."* Meanwhile, Sunita Dangol, the deputy mayoral candidate of the CPN-UML, became the target of misinformation after some media outlets published news of an anti-graft commission investigating her for an alleged forgery of her educational qualifications while working as a consultant at the Kathmandu Metropolitan City in the past.⁹

3.1.1.3 Sexualized distortion

Women politicians were often criticized as 'novices' who were thought to be better in their so-called 'traditional duties'. For example, UML leader K. Oli and RPP leader R. Thapa each received a large number of comments involving sexualized distortion. On April 23, Oli tweeted a photo of herself with a child with the caption *"The son I didn't give birth to."* In response, the tweet drew a large reaction on social media¹⁰ with many negative comments. One user noted *"It doesn't work once you are past your egg-laying age, so those who have desires [to be a mother] should think before it's late"* while another user wrote *"Don't you desire to give birth to a plump son just like him and play with him?"* Another user commented *"How would you give birth when you remain a spinster. Maybe this needs a husband or a boyfriend."* Oli was also often ridiculed in a similar fashion with social media trolls telling her to produce children. Furthermore, after

⁹ <https://kathmandupost.com/editorial/2022/05/05/fake-news>

¹⁰ In total, 19 retweets, 909 likes and 106 comments.

R. Thapa announced her marriage, several Facebook users demanded that she should bear a child within a year with one user commenting *"Finally, this rascal has fallen into line."*

3.1.1.4 Embarrassment and reputational risk

In total, some 49 expressions of embarrassment and or reputational risk nature were identified.¹¹ In February, in the run-up to the parliamentary ratification of the MCC when political parties were divided over whether to ratify the grant, CPN-US leader and federal minister Ram Kumar Jhakri drew strong negative reactions after she expressed support for the grant on social media. *"Hey whore, come over here, I'll pay Rs 10,000 per minute,"* commented one Facebook user and *"Madhav Kumar Nepal's youngest wife, how shameless of her to say such a thing!"* was the comment of another user. In March, the Maoist student leader P. Singh drew strong reactions after she demanded that a singer remove a song from YouTube, which allegedly depicted the insurgency in a poor light. Responding to Singh's post, a user reacted: *"You whore, you slept with whosoever third-grade leader to rise through party ranks, but the people got nothing for their sacrifice"* while another user observed *"The country is in a sorry state because of idiot politicians like you. The video shows the truth. Today you earned a lot of money and achieved the current position by sleeping with Prachanda and sucking his banana..."*

3.1.1.5 Physical threats

Physical threats against women politicians were relatively few in our study - 29 posts (28 on Facebook and one on Twitter). Such expressions seem to have been made as an outburst of anger against politicians. Most of the threats were issued against CPN-US leader and federal minister R.K. Jhakri in February when she posted a comment on Facebook supporting the MCC, *"...it is impossible to satisfy those who have intentions. I believe that this important project, which is to be completed in five years, will be completed on time. I am not under the euphoria of hollow patriotism. I am a nationalist citizen. I am formally and informally involved in the entire process. And I will be responsible for my each and every work and effort."* In response, Facebook users commented that she should be raped, murdered - shot dead or drowned with one user noting *"You Janthi! [casual abusive term, literal meaning*

¹¹ In total, 30 on Facebook and 19 on Twitter.

being ‘woman with pubic hair] I will take a screenshot of your post and if nothing happens within five years and if the Nepali people are subjected to sufferings like in other countries, then people will douse you in kerosene and burn you alive.’ Another user responded, “We will chop the head of politicians like you.” A comment containing physical threat aimed at CPN-UML leader K. Oli also read “I swear by my mother that I will blacken the face of this vixen should I find her.” The comment was made by a user responding to a February 11 tweet by Oli that read “Before coming to Dang, I had gone to meet respected chairman and asked him for a message to the people of Dang. And he said, ‘You are the friends of the people in both their joy and sorrow, so you should not hesitate to help people. For those engaged in politics, people are god,’ and this is exactly what I also think. Thank you, statesman.”

3.2 Analysis of targeted persons

The politicians who drew the highest number of attacks were: CPN-US federal minister R.K. Jhakri; CPN-UML leader and singer K. Oli; RPP leader and actress R. Thapa; CPN-MC student leader P. Singh; and CPN-UML lawmaker N. Lama. See Figure 3 and Figure 4. For example, Jhakri faced more attacks because she was among the few women politicians most active on social media and who was among those CPN-UML leaders who split from the party to launch the CPN-US last year. It is important to note here that social media is divided on partisan lines with users attacking rival party leaders and candidates regardless of gender or social media content. This explains why Jhakri, Oli and JSP leader H. Yami elicit negative reactions even when they post non-political content. Oli and Thapa were mostly dismissed as a singer and actor and both lacking political acumen. P. Singh drew many abusive comments when she allegedly demanded that a singer remove an anti-Maoist song from YouTube. S. Singh, who enjoyed a largely peaceful social media existence until her candidacy was announced, began facing attacks on Twitter mainly undermining her ability as a politician. Singh was active in NC politics in her college days and is married to the senior NC leader P.M. Singh. Many users questioned her political experience while others linked her ticket as a reward for her husband’s loyalty to the party chair. Many commenters found it easy to undermine her political aspirations by linking her past with domestic life. One person commented that household duties suited her better.

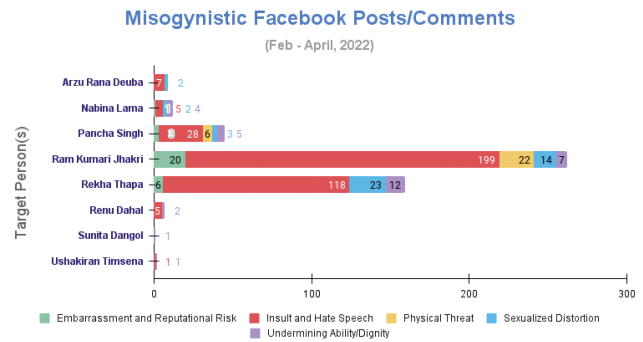


Figure 3: Misogynistic posts/comments received by women politicians on Facebook

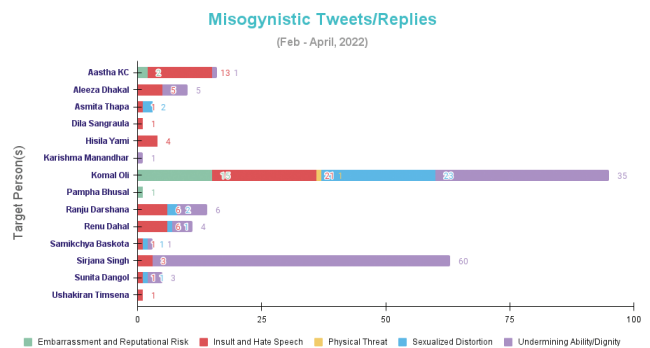


Figure 4: Misogynistic tweets/replies received by women politicians on Twitter

3.3 Analysis of Perpetrators

Features on Facebook and Twitter allow users to remain anonymous while spreading hate speech and misogynistic content. Of the 738 misogynistic content found, 48 (6.5 percent) came from locked Facebook accounts. While misogynistic content spread from locked profiles was minimal, some perpetrators used other means of anonymity, such as not using proper names. In total, 122 (16.5 percent) perpetrators used cryptic names on their profiles instead.¹² Use of such names were more common on Twitter (32.1 percent) than Facebook (9.3 percent). Similarly, 19.4 percent of perpetrator accounts did not have identifiable profiles and/or cover photos; instead, they used pictures of celebrities, mountains, Gods, sketches etc.. 37.6 percent of perpetrators on Twitter were found to have used such unidentifiable profiles or cover pictures while only 10.9 percent of perpetrators on Facebook used unidentifiable profiles or cover pictures.

12 For example, player, brother, father, Nepali, Mongolian heart, second son, third son, a village brother, and patriotic, etc.

Only 2.6 percent (19) of misogynistic content came from female perpetrators while 43.1 percent was from male perpetrators. In the remaining 54.1% of cases, the perpetrators did not disclose their gender. Only 308 Facebook users specified their gender on their profiles whereas the gender of perpetrators on Twitter were identified from their biographies. Seven perpetrators on Twitter specified their gender and all identified as male. None of the perpetrators identified with the LGBTQI+ community.

The number of followers/friends of perpetrator accounts shows the extent of the spread of misogynistic content and hate speech.¹³ Of all the perpetrators on Facebook, 36.3 percent had made the size of their network (the number of friends) visible, while on Twitter, most misogynistic content found came from users with fewer followers—110 (60.1 percent) accounts had 100 or less followers.¹⁴ Regarding the location of perpetrator accounts, 103 (42.7 percent) accounts on Twitter failed to disclose their locations, 99 (41.1 percent) accounts mentioned their location as Nepal while the rest (39) mentioned they were located outside Nepal. On Facebook 131 (26.4 percent) accounts were located abroad with most (62) either in the Gulf or Middle East. 104 (20.9 percent) accounts on Facebook did not disclose their location while 261 (52.5 percent) accounts were located in Nepal.

3.3.1 Repeat perpetrators

Repeat perpetrators were not significant in number. One Facebook user was found to have attacked A.R. Deuba four times. Three of the misogynistic comments were on Deuba's message on April 14. However, of the rest, 14 users targeted women politicians more than once, with each of them posting misogynistic comments twice.¹⁵ Most of the perpetrators targeted the same post by women politicians. Seven users posted misogynistic comments twice on R.K. Jhakri's one particular Facebook post where she had expressed support for the MCC compact. Similar patterns were observed on Twitter with eight accounts targeting women politicians more than once. Each of these accounts posted misogynistic replies

twice, all targeting the same persons. However, no traces of organized attacks were found on the profiles of repeat perpetrators on either social media platform.

4. CONCLUSION

Within the social media sphere, politically active women routinely face misogynistic attacks. Some women politicians, especially those from non-political backgrounds or families, have faced more attacks as political novices. The most common forms of attacks involve insults and hate speech and remarks undermining ability, and interjections of sexualised distortion. Expressions of physical threat were fewer compared to other categories, but most such expressions were recorded in February in the run-up to and after the parliamentary passage of the US\$ 500 million MCC compact that divided the nation. Furthermore, many social media accounts expressing misogynistic hate speech were fairly obscure with few or no followers. Many users involved in hate speech also live abroad and many accounts were created recently. While this research monitored and drew its findings from public social media accounts, anecdotal evidence suggests that attacks and harassment take place in personal messaging applications and in private groups as well but are much harder to track. As this research is based on a small sample, the results are just indicative of the patterns of misogynistic expressions. Finally, in context of the misogynistic hate speech lexicon compiled by this project, the focus was on social media interactions, which were mainly in the Nepali language. This research could not cover misogynistic hate speech content in other languages spoken in Nepal, which number over 100. In future, research or studies on online gendered violence against women in politics could expand to focus on several issues, including those of women's access to technology, inclusion, and the urban rural divide.

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¹³ This information is available on Twitter profiles while a security feature on Facebook allows users to hide the number and accounts on their friend lists.

¹⁴ In total, 10 perpetrators joined after May 2021 which includes one account created as early as April 2022.

¹⁵ Most of the perpetrators targeted the same person on the same post by women politicians.

