

The Digital Frontline: Online Gender-Based Violence as a Barrier to Women's Political Participation and Democracy in Nepal

1. Introduction: The Strategic Imperative of Digital Safety in Public Life

In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, the digital sphere has evolved into the primary infrastructure for political discourse - the modern town square. However, for a democracy to maintain its legitimacy, this space must be governed by principles of equity and safety. The digital security of women is not a peripheral "women's issue"; it is a non-negotiable prerequisite for a functioning democracy. When women are subjected to harassment, intimidation, and forms of "public punishment" for exercising their right to expression, the democratic principle of equal representation is compromised. If the digital space is fundamentally unsafe for half the population, the "town square" ceases to be a site of engagement and becomes a theater of exclusion.

In Nepal, the rapid expansion of digital platforms has created new opportunities for civic participation and political engagement. However, these spaces have also become sites where women politicians, activists, journalists, and public figures face disproportionate levels of harassment, intimidation, and gender-based abuse. The 2026 election period revealed how digital violence can be used to discourage women's participation in public and political life, raising critical concerns for democratic inclusion and gender equality.

This report analyzes systemic patterns of online gender-based violence (OGBV) as a structural barrier to participation. In alignment with established research protocols, this analysis focuses on the nature of harassment rather than the technical failures of specific social media platforms or applications. By shifting the focus from platform-specific critiques to the wider structural crisis, we can better understand how digital violence functions as a mechanism that restricts women's participation and weakens democratic inclusion during the 2026 electoral period.

2. The Scale of the Crisis: Global and Regional Data Synthesis

Strategic policy intervention requires a transition from viewing digital harassment as isolated incidents to recognizing it as a **wider structural issue**. This systemic pattern of abuse serves as a form of **silencing**, creating a significant barrier that limits women's participation in democracy and acts as a "public punishment" for their visibility in digital spaces,

The following data, derived from UN Women (2026)¹ and regional observations, quantifies the escalating severity of this digital crisis:

Key Metric	Statistical and Observed Reality
Reports of Online Violence	Reports of online violence against women journalists have doubled since 2020.
Psychological Impact	Nearly one in four affected women report experiencing clinical anxiety or depression linked to this abuse,
Targeting Patterns	A broader pattern exists where increased visibility for women whether in journalism or politics leads to increased exposure to violence and silencing,
Intersectional Vulnerability	Women face a heightened and specific risk through identity-based abuse, including targeted attacks based on caste, identity, and political opinions

The "So What?" Layer: Visibility as Liability

The synthesis of this data reveals a corrosive correlation: for women, professional visibility is directly proportional to personal vulnerability. This creates a "participation tax" a cost of entry into the public sphere that men are rarely required to pay. In Nepal, this crisis is compounded by intersectional factors, where harassment frequently transcends sexual comments to include vitriolic attacks based on caste, indigeneity, and sexual and gender identity. This dynamic transforms professional achievement into a personal liability because women's visibility in public life directly challenges patriarchal power structures that have historically confined women to private and domestic roles. Digital violence functions as a disciplinary mechanism, punishing women who exercise public authority and sending a broader message that leadership, political influence, and decision-making remain contested spaces for women. The resulting environment signals that the price of leadership is not merely public scrutiny but the constant threat of attacks on one's dignity, reputation, bodily autonomy, and psychological safety.

3. Methodology

This report adopts a qualitative, evidence-based approach to examine patterns of online gender-based violence (OGBV) targeting women in Nepal's public and political spheres during the 2026 electoral period. The analysis is based on publicly available digital evidence, including social

¹ UN Women. (2026, April). *Reports to police of online violence against women journalists double since 2020 with one in four experiencing related anxiety and/or depression*. Retrieved from UN Women: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2026/04/reports-to-police-of-online-violence-against-women-journalists-double-since-2020-with-one-in-four-experiencing-related-anxiety-and-or-depression>

media posts, online discussions, news reports, screenshots, and documented incidents involving women candidates, activists, and public figures.

The case studies were selected because they received significant public attention and illustrate distinct forms of digital violence, including gendered ridicule, sexualized disinformation, AI-generated manipulation, identity-based harassment, and direct threats. The objective is not to provide an exhaustive account of all incidents but to identify recurring patterns that demonstrate how digital spaces can be used to discourage women's participation in public life.

The report combines these illustrative cases with existing literature on online gender-based violence, digital rights, and political participation to analyze the broader implications for democratic inclusion and gender equality in Nepal.

4. Case Studies in Professional and Personal Silencing

The following cases illustrate how online gender-based violence manifests in different forms, ranging from gendered ridicule and AI-generated manipulation to direct threats and coordinated campaigns of political de-legitimization. Case studies provide the necessary granular detail to humanize statistical trends and illustrate the precise mechanics of "public punishment" used to maintain patriarchal gatekeeping in Nepalese politics.

I. Patriarchal Weaponization of Motherhood as a Barrier to Political Participation

Patriarchal societies have long used motherhood and reproductive roles as tools to restrict women's participation in leadership and decision-making. Women entering politics are often judged not on their competence, vision, or qualifications but on their perceived ability to fulfill socially prescribed domestic responsibilities. Digital platforms have amplified this form of gendered scrutiny, allowing attacks on women's bodies, reproductive choices, and family roles to be rapidly disseminated and normalized. Such narratives reinforce the notion that political leadership and motherhood are incompatible, thereby discouraging women from seeking public office and limiting their participation in democratic processes.

The experience of Ranju Darshana during the 2026 election cycle illustrates this pattern. Rather than engaging with her political agenda, critics weaponized her pregnancy to question her fitness for leadership. By framing motherhood and political leadership as mutually exclusive, online



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Fighting an election while pregnant. Even after the election, she should properly take care of her newborn for at least 1, 2 years to be a good mother. It would have been better if that ticket had been given to someone else who could have actively done the campaigning. Hope that fake guy Mishra does not win because of this.

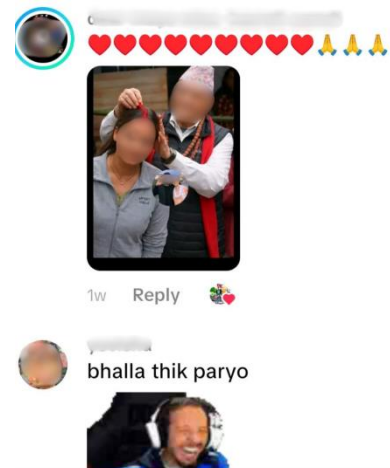
actors sought to delegitimize her political participation and reinforce traditional expectations that women belong primarily within domestic spaces. Her experience demonstrates how motherhood continues to be strategically used as a barrier to women's political engagement.

The digital campaign against Ranju Darshana during the 2026 election cycle serves as a prime example of the weaponization of motherhood. Critics did not merely disagree with her policy platforms; they weaponized her pregnancy to argue her biological "unfitness" for leadership. By mocking her body and questioning her capability through the lens of maternal duty, detractors sought to "domesticate" a high-profile public figure, framing her political presence as an inherent violation of traditional social roles.

II. AI-Enabled Gendered Political Violence

Patriarchal control over women's public participation has adapted to technological change, with artificial intelligence creating new tools for gendered political violence. Women in public life are increasingly targeted through manipulated images, deepfakes, and fabricated narratives designed to undermine their credibility, autonomy, and public legitimacy. Unlike conventional misinformation, these attacks frequently rely on sexualization, character assassination, and public humiliation to regulate women's political agency and discourage their participation in public discourse.

The case of Renuka Baral illustrates this trend. Following her expression of political support, she was targeted through manipulated imagery, including a fabricated image depicting a political leader applying sindoor to her forehead. This culturally significant symbol was weaponized to transform a political position into a narrative of personal and sexual dependency. Her experience demonstrates how emerging technologies are increasingly being used to reinforce gendered power hierarchies and intimidate women who engage in political expression.²



III. Gendered Ridicule and Political Delegitimization

A common strategy used to discourage women's political participation is the systematic trivialization of their leadership through ridicule, mockery, and sexualized humor. Rather than engaging with women's political positions, qualifications, or policy agendas, online attacks frequently portray women candidates as unserious, incompetent, or unworthy of public office.

² AI-manipulated image showing the political leader supported by the victim: Baral, applying "sindoor" on her forehead to spread misleading and sexualized content. Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9WjmtsT/>

Such tactics shift public attention away from political issues and undermine women's legitimacy as political actors³.

The experience of Nisha Adhikari during Nepal's 2026 elections illustrates this pattern. While her campaign sought to engage voters on political issues, online discourse frequently focused on sexualized jokes, derogatory memes, and mockery of her election symbol. Rather than being evaluated on her political agenda, she became a target of ridicule and entertainment. Her experience demonstrates how misogynistic online cultures delegitimize women's political participation by reducing them to stereotypes and objects of public mockery⁴.



IV. Sexualized Disinformation and Identity-Based Harassment

Women entering politics often face coordinated forms of digital violence that combine misogyny, disinformation, and identity-based discrimination. Such attacks are designed not only to damage individual reputations but also to reinforce broader social hierarchies based on gender, caste, ethnicity, class, and other intersecting identities. By targeting women's identities rather than their political ideas, these forms of abuse create hostile environments that discourage meaningful participation in public life.

The experience of Rima Bishwokarma demonstrates this pattern. Following her entry into politics, she became the target of manipulated narratives, online trolling, and sexualized AI-generated content linking her to political leaders. Rather than engaging with her qualifications or political contributions, online attacks focused on her identity and personal reputation. Her experience highlights how digital spaces can



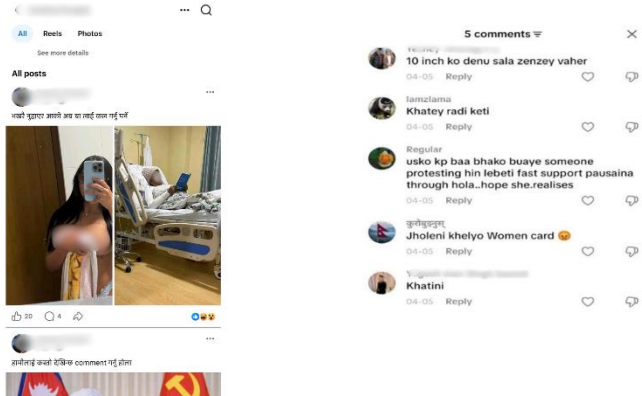
³ Screenshot of TikTok comment commenting a sexualizing joke on Adhikari and her political campaign. Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9W2agYV/>

⁴ Sexualized meme using a pornographic actor's image and the derogatory term "radi" to target the Adhikari. Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9W2my8v/>

be weaponized to reinforce discriminatory social norms and silence women who seek visibility and influence in public life ⁵.

V. Direct Threats as Tools of Political Intimidation

Online gender-based violence frequently escalates beyond ridicule and misinformation into direct threats intended to silence women through fear. Such threats represent a form of political intimidation that seeks to deter women from exercising their democratic rights, expressing political opinions, and participating in public discourse. The objective is not merely to harass individual women but to create a wider climate of fear that discourages women's participation in political and civic life.⁶



The experience of Amisha Parajuli illustrates this escalation. Following her public expression of political support, she was subjected to rape threats, impersonation accounts, and coordinated online abuse. Similar tactics observed during the 2026 election period, including misogynistic slurs and the circulation of sexually explicit content, demonstrate how digital violence is used as a mechanism of coercion and control. Her experience reflects a broader pattern in which threats and intimidation are deployed to punish women who exercise political voice and challenge traditional gender norms.⁷

5. Theoretical Framework: Online Violence as a Democratic Barrier

Understanding the power dynamics of digital spaces requires a feminist lens that recognizes online violence as a manifestation of deeper patriarchal resistance to female agency.

As argued by Nadim & Fladmoe (2021)⁸, online harassment functions as a systematic "silencing" mechanism through:

⁵ Screenshot of TikTok comment commenting on Bishwokarma's personal life. Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9WRNsB3/>

⁶ Fake impersonation Facebook Profile of Parajuli showing manipulated content. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/share/1JUrnUwhpU/>

⁷ Abusive comments against Parajuli for utilizing her cyber right. Source: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZS9W8HNyc/>

⁸ Nadim, M., & Fladmoe, A. (2021). Silencing Women? Gender and Online Harassment, Vol. 39(2). *Social Science Computer Review*, 245-258.

- **The Reduction of the Individual:** While men are engaged on the merits of their ideas, women are "reduced" to their bodies, relationships, and caste identities.
- **Gradual Exclusion:** The cumulative weight of abuse increases the "cost" of participation until women are forced to self-censor or exit the digital square.
- **Structural Intimidation:** Violence is used as a gatekeeping barrier to limit the democratic participation of specific demographics.

Furthermore, Sanín & Krook (2016)⁹ emphasize that this is a targeted form of gendered political violence. The transition from "digital abuse" to "physical safety concerns" creates a profound **chilling effect**. When women anticipate that a political post will lead to rape threats or deepfake pornographic memes, they often engage in preemptive self-censorship. This self-censorship is the ultimate victory for those seeking to undermine democracy, as it removes diverse voices from the discourse before they can even be heard.

6. The Legislative Chasm: Law vs. Lived Experience

There is an urgent strategic imperative to align legal frameworks with the evolving nature of digital harm. The current "Justice Gap" in Nepal highlights the failure of existing systems to respond to gendered nuances.

The Justice Gap

Existing Legal Frameworks in Nepal	The Lived Reality / Gaps
Electronic Transactions Act (2008)	"Neutral" focus; treats coordinated gendered silencing the same as a generic data breach.
Privacy Act (2018)	Weak enforcement; fails to address the viral nature of AI-generated sexualized content.
Cyber Security Policy (2023)	Obsolescence: Lack of AI-specific regulation regarding deepfakes and coordinated "troll farms."

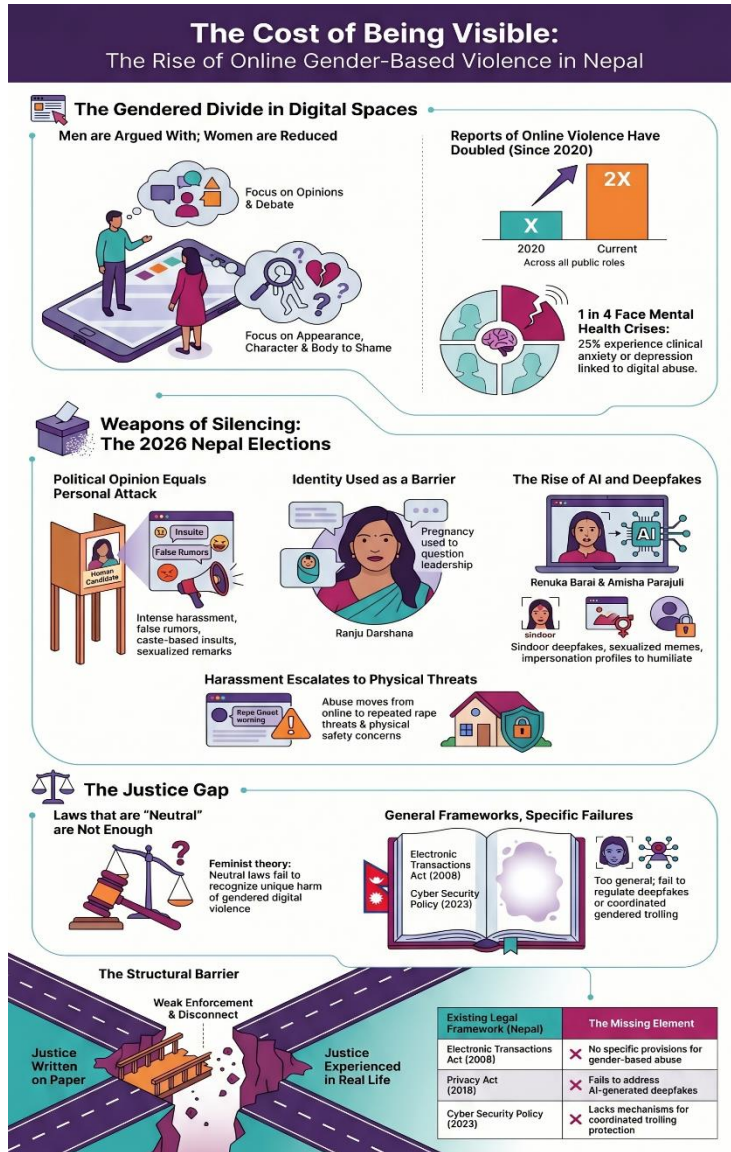
Applying Catharine A. MacKinnon's (1989)¹⁰ theory, we can conclude that these laws fail precisely because they attempt to be "neutral." By treating a targeted, gendered attack intended to strip a woman of her political voice as a general cybercrime, the law ignores the **gendered intent** of the harm. A neutral law is an insufficient shield against a crisis rooted in systematic power

⁹ Sanín, J. R., & Krook, M. L. (2016). Violence Against Women in Politics: A Defense of the Concept. *Política y Gobierno* 23(2), 459-490.

¹⁰ MacKinnon, C. A. (1989). *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press.

imbalances. The current legal framework’s failure to recognize the intersection of caste and gender in digital abuse leaves the most vulnerable participants entirely unprotected.

7. Conclusion: Reclaiming the Digital Public Square



Digital harassment is not an accidental byproduct of modern technology; it is a deliberate mechanism of control rooted in patriarchal norms intended to "shut down" women’s public presence. True freedom of voice cannot exist while women are forced to weigh democratic participation against the risk of personal safety, psychological trauma, and sexualized humiliation.

The 2026 election patterns in Nepal must not be allowed to become the permanent digital norm. Addressing this crisis requires more than incremental legal adjustments; it demands a **re-conceptualization of digital rights as human rights**. To ensure the integrity of the democratic process, the state must move beyond "neutral" legislation and develop robust, enforceable protections that recognize the specific nature of gendered and identity-based violence. Only by closing the gap between law and lived experience can we reclaim the digital public square as a site of participation rather than a site of

exclusion.

8. Recommendations

To address online gender-based violence as a barrier to democratic participation, coordinated action is required from government institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, media actors, and technology platforms.

i. Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks

Existing cyber laws should be updated to explicitly recognize online gender-based violence, AI-generated sexualized content, deepfakes, and coordinated digital harassment as distinct forms of harm. Legal provisions should reflect the gendered nature of these attacks and provide accessible mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and redress.

ii. Establish Survivor-Centered Response Mechanisms

Government institutions, political parties, and civil society organizations should establish rapid-response systems that provide legal aid, psychosocial support, digital security assistance, and referral services for women facing online violence. Such mechanisms should be accessible, confidential, and sensitive to the needs of women from diverse social backgrounds.

iii. Protect Women's Political Rights in Digital Spaces

Online violence against women should be recognized as a direct barrier to political participation, democratic representation, and bodily autonomy. Digital platforms increasingly function as spaces where women's bodies, identities, and personal lives become targets of surveillance, manipulation, and public punishment. Such attacks are not random acts of individual misconduct; they reflect broader patriarchal and profit-driven technological systems that often benefit from engagement generated through outrage, misogyny, and harmful content.

Electoral bodies, political parties, government institutions, civil society organizations, and technology companies must recognize that digital platforms are being used as strategic tools to regulate and control women's participation in public life. Efforts should therefore move beyond reactive content moderation toward the development of gender-transformative technologies and accountability mechanisms that prioritize human rights, safety, and equality. Protecting women from digital attacks is essential not only for safeguarding individual rights but also for ensuring inclusive democratic participation and challenging structural forms of gender discrimination embedded within digital ecosystems.

iv. Engage Men and Boys as Allies for Gender-Just Digital Spaces

Addressing online gender-based violence cannot be the responsibility of women alone. Men and boys must be actively engaged as allies in challenging misogyny, harmful stereotypes, and digital harassment. Educational institutions, civil society organizations, media actors, and political parties should promote positive masculinities and encourage men to speak out against online abuse. Building gender-just digital spaces requires collective accountability and shared responsibility.

v. *Promote Public Awareness and Digital rights*

National campaigns should challenge the normalization of sexist jokes, victim-blaming, online shaming, and technology-facilitated abuse. Public awareness efforts should emphasize that digital violence is not merely an online issue but a violation of human rights that undermines democratic participation and freedom of expression.

vi. *Political Parties to Adopt Digital Ethics and Safety Protocols*

Political parties should establish codes of conduct addressing online harassment, misinformation, and gender-based attacks. Parties should also provide candidates and supporters with training on ethical digital engagement and mechanisms for responding to online abuse.

vii. *Strengthen Research, Documentation, and Advocacy*

Civil society organizations, academic institutions, and media organizations should collaborate to systematically document incidents of online gender-based violence and generate evidence for advocacy and policy reform. Continued research is essential for understanding emerging threats, including AI-generated content, and for developing effective responses.

Protecting women from online violence is not solely a matter of individual safety; it is fundamental to safeguarding democratic participation, human rights, and inclusive governance. A digital public sphere where women can participate freely, safely, and with dignity is a prerequisite for a just and democratic society.

viii. *Promote Ethical Media Reporting and Digital Accountability*

Media organizations should adopt gender-sensitive reporting standards and avoid reproducing sexist narratives, manipulated content, or victim-blaming discourses. Journalists and editors can play a critical role in challenging online violence by centering women's political contributions rather than amplifying harassment and controversy.

ix. *Strengthen feminist Movement to dismantle all forms of structural discrimination*

Feminist movements have historically played a critical role in exposing and challenging structural inequalities that limit women's participation in public life. Addressing online gender-based violence requires strengthening feminist organizing, advocacy, and solidarity across digital and physical spaces. A feminist approach recognizes that online violence is not an isolated technological problem but a manifestation of broader systems of patriarchy, exclusion, and unequal power relations.

Civil society organizations, women's rights groups, digital rights advocates, and social movements should collaborate to advance feminist digital justice by promoting gender-transformative policies, supporting survivors, challenging discriminatory norms, and holding both state institutions and technology companies accountable. Building collective resistance against online violence is essential to creating digital spaces that uphold equality, dignity, bodily autonomy, and democratic participation for all women and marginalized communities.

9. References

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Additional evidence for case studies was collected from publicly available social media content, online news reports, and digital documentation relating to the 2026 election period in Nepal.