

Digital Threats to Women in Politics

During the Uganda 2021 Election



Background

Women in Uganda face various challenges that undermine their use of the web and other Information and Communications Technology (ICT) when compared with their male counterparts. These challenges mirror the impediments which women face in the offline world including in access to education and economic opportunities, participation in civic processes and claiming their rights to freedom of expression and access to information.

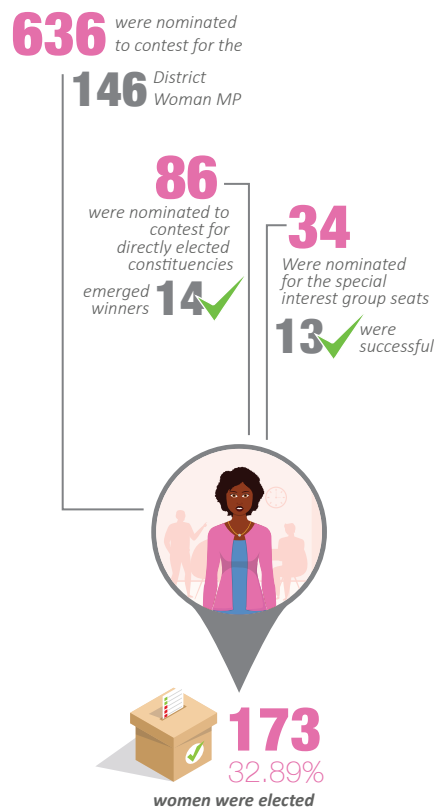
Despite disparities in access to and use of digital technologies, more women face various forms of online violence than men, which severely undermines their engagement and active participation online. The absence of laws designed to specifically address the technology-enabled violence against women (such as revenge pornography, trolling, and threats) and the lack of sufficient in-country reporting mechanisms, exacerbate these challenges and often result in many women being forced to go offline or resorting to self-censorship.

Compared to the 2016 elections, the 2021 elections in Uganda had more women vying for political positions. Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic and related restrictions, technology took centre stage in the electoral process, with increased reliance on digital platforms for aspirants to reach constituents and for citizens to engage.

This research brief provides an overview of the digital threats to women in politics in the Uganda 2021 elections. Based on desk research and interviews, the brief analyses the gender dynamics of politics in online spaces in Uganda, including campaigns for presidential, parliamentary, mayoral, and other local government seats.

The brief also explores the legal landscape and provides insights into whether Uganda has an enabling environment for women's online engagement and representation in politics. Further, it presents recommendations for enhancing women's equality and equity online and in politics in Uganda.

1 Introduction



According to the Electoral Commission (EC) of Uganda, as of December 2020, there were 17.6 million registered voters of whom 9.2 million (52.21%) were women. 27 Women constitute a small fraction of elective positions in the political space in Uganda. Out of 290 directly elective parliamentary seats, as of December 2020 only 18 (6%) were occupied by women. Most female Members of Parliament (MPs) join the legislature through the affirmative action plan which provides for a women MP for each district in Uganda. With an overall 35% women's representation in the legislature, the 2019 Women in National Parliament World Classification ranked Uganda 33rd among the 190 countries surveyed.¹

For the executive arm of government, there has been at least one female candidate vying for the presidency in each of the last four elections - Miria Kalule Obote in 2006, Beti Olive Namisango Kamyia in 2011, Maureen Kyalya in 2016, and Nancy Kalembe in the 2021 elections. Across the years, results have been dismal with the women candidates failing to score more than 2% of the total vote. Nancy Kalembe reached the eighth position out of 11 presidential aspirants.

The 2021 elections saw the first woman candidate, Nabilah Kaggayi, contest for the position of Mayor of the capital city Kampala. She lost. At district level, the 2021 general election recorded a total of 636 women nominations for the 146 District Woman MP seats, while 86 women were nominated to contest for directly elected constituencies of which only 14 emerged winners. 34 women were nominated for the special interest group seats in parliament (youth, defence forces, Persons with Disabilities, workers, and the elderly) and 13 of the 34 were successful.² In total, 173 (33%) women were elected to represent different constituencies in the 11th Parliament of Uganda out of the 529 MPs.³

The Local Government Act provides for directly elected positions, affirmative and special interest groups. Qualified women are eligible to contest for all positions. Overall, in the 2016 election the representation of women at directly elected positions was low (1.0%). Out of 8,793 directly elected council positions, 87 were won by women. The least representation of women was at sub-county level while the highest was at municipality level.⁴

Research in Uganda has also showed that women who advocated for gender equality, feminism, and sexual minority rights appeared to face heightened levels of cyber violence. A great deal of the violence that such women experience is personal and involves their close friends and family, particularly where issues of sexual orientation are concerned.⁵

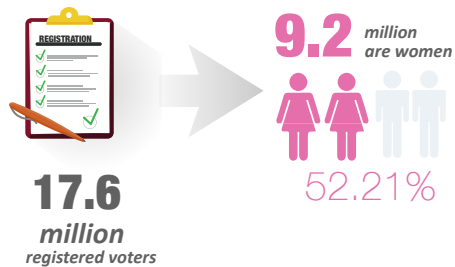
¹ Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), 1st February 2019; <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> accessed on 18th December 2020

² Uganda Women's Parliamentary Association (UWOPA), Press Release February, 2021

³ UWOPA, Note 2 above

⁴ https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/04_2019Women_In_Local_Government.pdf

⁵ CIPESA, In Search Of Safe Spaces Online, https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=404



Studies show that the reasons why few women participate in elective politics are varied but they include social-cultural portrayals of women as caregivers whose place is considered to be the private spheres of society as opposed to involvement in political and legislative discourse which are public spheres.⁶ The broader gender-related challenges are influenced by elements such as religion which shapes women’s morality and sexuality as a subordinate; capitalism which places women at the bottom of a grossly unequal and exploitative social and economic hierarchy which is resistant to change.⁷

The hostility to women daring to challenge the norm is experienced both online and offline. In a survey done by Pollicy on the experiences of African women on the internet, it was noted that 1 in 3 women has suffered some form of violence on the internet.⁸ These included online stalking, name-calling, slut shaming and sexual harassment.⁹ Online experiences extend into the offline world and vice versa with the experiences of women being more extreme than those of their male counterparts when they are in positions of power, are vocal on social issues, are involved in politics, are part of the entertainment industry, or when they are in the media.

In 2018, Hon. Sylvia Rwabwogo, the Kabarole District Woman MP, filed a criminal case in courts of law against a young man on charges of sending her unsolicited messages over SMS.¹⁰ In the media, the messages were coined as “love messages” while social media was awash with a trivialising narrative aimed at Rwabwogo, thus watering down the severity of the allegations.¹¹

6 S. Tamale, 'When Hens Begin to Crow. Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda' (1999) accessed here <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429503085> on 18th December 2020

7 S. Tamale (note 6 above) at Pg.3

8 A. Whitehead 'Gender-based violence has gone online in Africa - report' August 20, 2020 <https://internews.org/news/gender-based-violence-has-gone-online-africa-report> accessed on 27th December, 2020

9 Pollicy 'A survival guide to being a woman on the internet' August 2020 <https://ogbv.pollicy.org>

10 DailyMonitor, 'Court sets free Kabarole Woman MP's stalker Isiko' February 03, 2020 <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/court-sets-free-kabarole-woman-mp-s-stalker-isiko-1873098>

11 <https://ugmirror.com/index.php/2018/11/27/brian-isiko-love-messages-to-mp-rwabwogo-leak/>

2 Legal and Policy Landscape on Women's Participation in Politics in Uganda

- a.
- The 1995 Constitution of Uganda**
- Uganda's 1995 Constitution recognises women as a historically marginalised group that requires affirmative action to promote their wellbeing.¹² It further provides that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men¹³ and commits to provide the facilities and opportunities necessary to enhance women's welfare and to enable realisation of their full potential and advancement.¹⁴ This includes providing opportunities to participate in elective politics on an equal standing with male candidates.
- All citizens have a fundamental right to freedom of association which includes the freedom to form and join associations or unions, including political and other civic organisations, as guaranteed under Article 29(1) of Uganda's Constitution. Further, as part of affirmative action efforts, Article 78(1)(b)(e) dictates that there will be one woman representative in Parliament for each of the 112 districts¹⁵ in the country.
- b.
- Parliamentary Elections Act and Local Government's Act**
- The Parliamentary Elections Act, 2005 and Local Governments Act, 1997 provide for specific quotas for women's representation in elective politics as part of Uganda Government's intentional obligation to promote women's participation in politics and public governance. These statutes are supported by the Uganda Gender Policy 2007, which underpins affirmative action with a requirement for representation of women at all levels of leadership. However, the gender policy makes no explicit mention on access and use of technology as an enabler of the affirmative action goals. Section 117(1) of the Local Government's Act of 1997 provides for gazetted positions for women in all local council elections. The requirement (which has been attained) is that at least 30% of all positions in local councils must be occupied by women.
- c.
- Soft Laws**
- Uganda is party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which sets forth women's right to equality and non-discrimination in political and electoral processes.¹⁶ Uganda is also party to the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR, 1966) which in its Article 25 buttresses the rights of all citizens to "take part in the conduct of public affairs" and "to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the electors."¹⁷
- While the ICCPR establishes that no discrimination on the basis of gender is permitted in the exercise of the rights to vote and to participate in public life, the [Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW), 1979, goes beyond this approach, by placing a positive obligation on States parties such as Uganda to take all appropriate measures to eliminate women's exclusion from politics. Article 7 of the CEDAW states that;

¹² Constitution (note 4 above) in Article 32 (1)

¹³ Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, 1995 as amended. See Article 33(1)

¹⁴ Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, Article 33(2)

¹⁵ Local Governments, Government of Uganda, <https://www.gou.go.ug/content/local-governments>

¹⁶ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights>

¹⁷ United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.asp>

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, shall ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right:

(a) To vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies;

(b) To participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government;

(c) To participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.”



Furthermore, Article 4 of the CEDAW encourages the use of temporary special measures to accelerate the achievement of de facto equality, in light of Article 7 of the Convention.¹⁸

Women’s right to participate fully in all facets of public life has continued to be a cornerstone of numerous United Nations (UN) resolutions and declarations. From the UN Economic and Social Council Resolution (2009),¹⁹ to the [Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action \(1995\)](#), the [Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security \(2000\)](#), the [Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions 2006](#) and the [General Assembly Resolution 66/130 on Women and political participation \(2011\)](#).²⁰ Governments have consistently been urged to implement measures to substantially increase the number of women in elective and appointive public offices and functions at all levels, with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through affirmative action.

More recently, the [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 5](#) “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” seeks to “ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life” (target 5.5). Its indicators include the “proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments” (5.5.1) and the “proportion of women in managerial positions” (5.5.2). Also, [SDG 16](#) “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” cannot be achieved without ensuring equal opportunities for men and women to participate in politics and elections.

¹⁸ United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979)*. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>

¹⁹ United Nations, *Future organization and methods of work of the Commission on the Status of Women*, <https://www.un.org/ecosoc/sites/www.un.org/ecosoc/files/documents/2009/resolution-2009-15.pdf>

²⁰ United Nations, *Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions (2006)*, <https://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/5577464.10369873.html>

d.

Laws Related to Digital Rights

In July 2016, resolution A/HRC/32/L.20 of the United Nations declared that “online freedom” is a “human right,” and one that must be protected.²¹ The African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) also adopted several resolutions aimed at promoting the right to information and freedom of expression on the internet in Africa which include ACHPR/Res. 362 (LIX) 2016, adopted in Banjul on November 4, 2016. The resolution reaffirms the fundamental right to freedom of information and expression enshrined under Article 9 of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights and in other international human rights instruments and recognises the role of the internet in advancing human and people’s rights in Africa.²²

As a signatory and/or party to these international and regional human rights instruments, Uganda is obligated to enact and implement national laws and policies to regulate online interaction, including making the internet accessible, safe and affordable for all.

Over the years, several laws have been enacted which affected digital access and rights, including laws to improve access to information, deal with cybercrime and regulate telecommunications. However, some of these laws negate citizens’ rights online and most hardly address the gender dynamics of the internet. These include the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act, 2010, and the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2002, the Computer Misuse Act 2011 and the Anti-Pornography Act 2014.

Often critics of the government have fallen victim to these laws. Among them, academic and 2021 political aspirant Dr. Stella Nyanzi, who was arrested and jailed over content she posted on Facebook. Dr. Nyanzi was charged with cyber harassment contrary to Sections 24(1) and 24(2) of Uganda’s Computer Misuse Act, 2011²³ and was sentenced to 18 months in prison. This conviction was however quashed and the sentence set aside by the High Court on technicalities that the trial magistrate had not considered. The Computer Misuse Act continues to play a pivotal role in self-censorship online despite the potential it has to address some of the gender based online violence experienced by women.

The Excise Duty (Amendment) Act 2018, introduced the ‘social media tax’ on July 1, 2018, the result of which saw more women affected²⁴ due to existing financial inequalities and thus a further widening of the digital divide between men and women. The tax which requires citizens to pay UGX 200 per day to access social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype and Viber, blocked access to information for millions of Ugandans for whom the additional cost of accessing the internet was unaffordable.²⁵ The gender gap in internet access is also perpetuated by the lack of digital skills and affordability of ICT services especially broadband connectivity.²⁶

²¹ United Nations, Human Rights Council, Thirty-second session, https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf

²² ACHPR/Res.362(LIX)2016 <https://www.achpr.org/sessions/resolutions?id=374>

²³ <https://www.africanews.com/2020/02/21/ugandans-celebrate-acquittal-of-popular-activist-stella-nyanzi/>

²⁴ Advox, Uganda’s tax on social media will widen the digital gender gap, <https://advox.globalvoices.org/2018/07/09/ugandas-tax-on-social-media-will-widen-the-digital-gender-gap/>

²⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/uganda-one-year-of-social-media-tax/a-49672632>

²⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2018/7/1/uganda-introduces-social-media-tax-despite-criticism>

3 The Lead up to The 2021 General Elections




In June 2020, the EC decreed that, due to social distancing required by Covid-19 standard operating procedures, no physical campaigns would take place. Further, Parliament passed the Political Parties and Organisations (Conduct of Meetings and Elections) Regulations 2020, which aim to safeguard public health and safety of political party activities in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and, under regulation 5, provide for holding of political meetings through virtual means. The maximum number of persons allowed to attend campaign meetings was later set at 70 and then raised to 200.

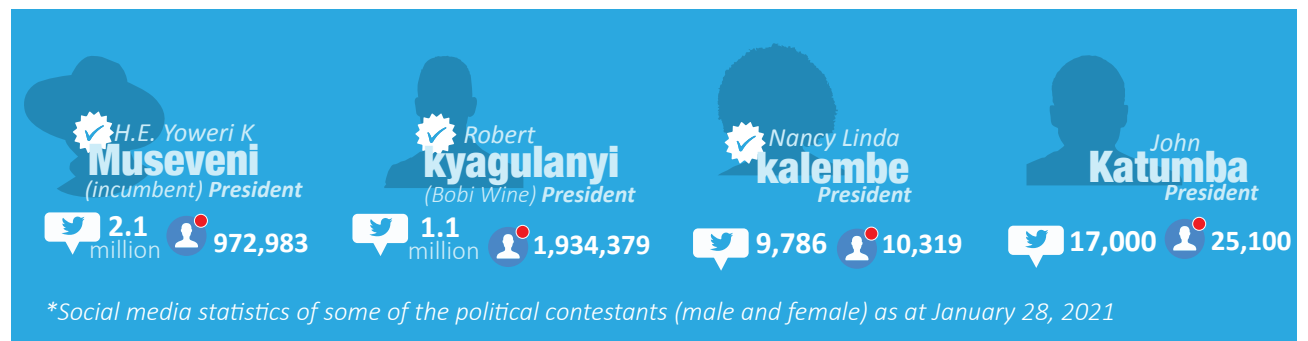
This approach proved advantageous for candidates who already had an active presence online, a history of engagement with their audiences, and large followings on social media platforms. Other candidates were left to scramble for airtime on radio and television.

For all positions being sought, alongside traditional media, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter became pivotal tools used by all aspirants to communicate their manifestos, campaign plans and strategies, among others. Further, some of this content was transferred to messaging platforms such as Whatsapp, which enabled reinforcement of messaging or the further distribution of information.

a.

Presidential

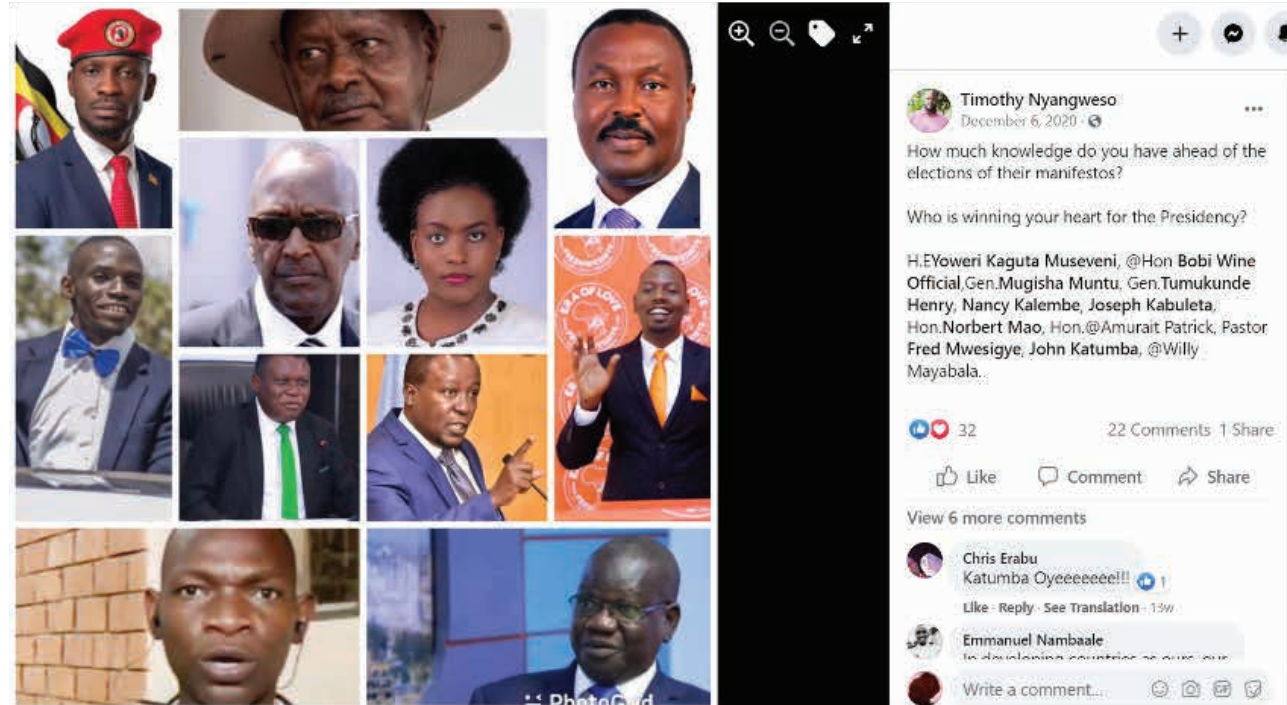
Verified account 
Twitter followers 
Facebook followers 





Of the **11**
presidential aspirants
there was only
one
woman

Of the 11 presidential aspirants, the sole woman Nancy Kalembe only joined Facebook and Twitter in February 2020, which placed her far behind some of her competitors who had an established following built over a longer period of time. It also gave her less than a year to build a following. Nonetheless, her small following on social media could be attributed to her limited engagement in active politics prior to her presidential bid. Despite her small following, her Twitter account was verified within months of its initiation.



Kalembe's personal Facebook account was occasionally updated in the lead up to the elections. Her strategy which had heavily religious undertones in her tweets may have shielded her from the online attacks that are typically faced by women in politics. Further to this, her largely neutral content on Twitter and Facebook did not ignite much reaction. The handful of reactions she received were complimentary of her physique as opposed to the message in the posts or anything in relation to the presidential bid.



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I greet you all, thank you for the support so far in this journey. However, much is still needed to complete the work and therefore I still seek for your financial and material support. Anything contributed towards this cause will be put to good use and is highly appreciated. May God bless you abundantly. Yours truly,
KALEMBE NANCY LINDA.

- Edison Etori**
Let women show us the men the way. If only just 30 % of the women vote for their fellow woman, then 21 % of the men will follow suit and give Kalembe the much needed 51 % to enter State House. But you never know with women.
Like · Reply · 13w
- Nelson Besigye**
You are a galant lady and I am proud to have you on that ballot
Like · Reply · 13w
- Bazigo Samuel**
Her excellence,
We are waiting for you in Iganga as your supporters want to have a look on you
Good luck
Like · Reply · 13w
- Mathews Otieno**
You will get my support madam president
Like · Reply · 13w

Hamza Abigaba
January 11 · 🌐

Apart from M7's and Bobi's future 1st ladies,I seem not to see wives of the other presidential candidates..
As for [Nancy Kalembe](#) , her beauty and brains can intimidate any man.

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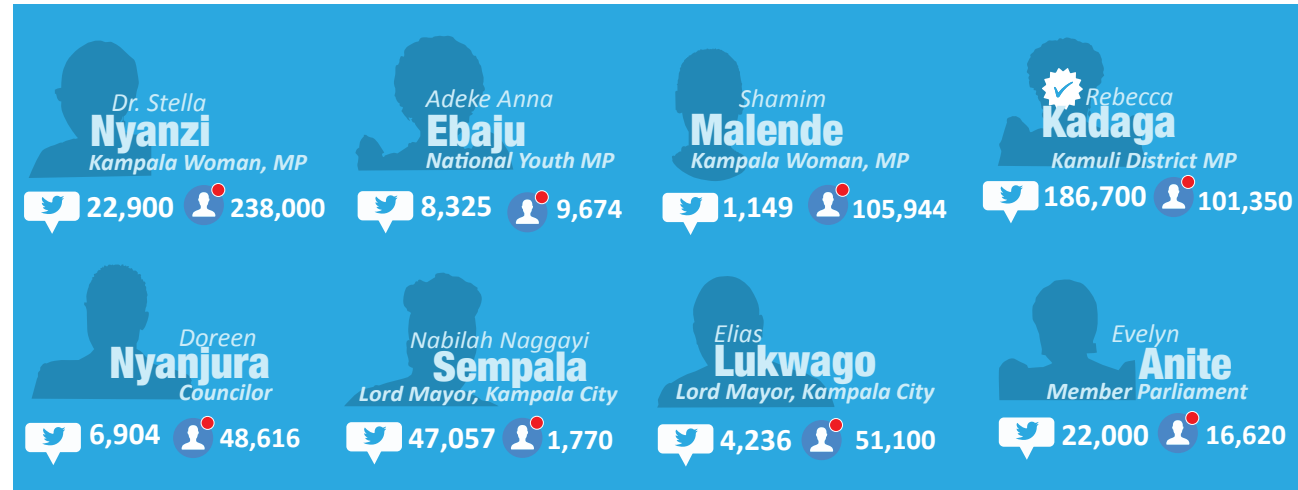
The level of engagement on her page remained low with comments appearing to indicate that Uganda is not ready for a female president. However, Kalembe pointed out in an [interview](#), "It was women who came out to fight me when I announced my bid."

b.
**Directly elected
 Members of Parliament**

One of the most active female MP on social media is Evelyn Anite who uses the platforms to rally support for herself. This popularity is accredited to her having served as a cabinet minister in the ruling government, a position that necessitated that she communicates beyond her constituency. On Twitter, Anite (@HonAniteEvelyn) boasts just over 22,000 followers, having joined the platform in February 2019, while on Facebook, she has 14,000 followers.

Verified account 
 Twitter followers 
 Facebook followers 

**Social media statistics of some of the political contestants (male and female) as at January 28, 2021*



Anite’s social media handles played a prominent role in her campaign for re-election in the 2021 Parliamentary election but she lost the primaries and later the parliamentary seat to a little known male challenger, Dr. Ayume Charles (@DrAyumeCharles), who had far fewer social media followers.

Social media served as a channel to disseminate what the two candidates stood for and served as an avenue for mainstream media to source news. The reactions to their content was vast as Anite often received violent attacks and threats to her campaign, whilst her male colleague was often applauded for his looks, brains and the new perspectives he brought to the campaign.²⁷

Candidates in municipalities and urban centers relied on social media just as much as the presidential, MP and mayoral candidates. In Kampala, Dr. Stella Nyanzi campaigned for the position of Kampala Woman MP for which she actively used her Facebook page to provide daily updates of her campaign activities. With a Facebook following of over 234,000, Dr. Nyanzi consistently posted about her door-to-door activities including those with other members of her party, the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC). Further, she created narratives with the hashtag #FromPrisonToParliament, a tactic that was not as aggressively used by other women political contenders who instead were associated with reigning hashtags such as #UgandaDecides and #SecureYourFuture.

While Nyanzi received relatively positive reactions and encouragement, there were some posts which used her prior arrests and jail sentence against her on occasion deeming her as an unfit candidate. Also campaigning for the Kampala Woman MP position was lawyer Shamim Malende, who mostly posed about her activities in the courts of law to her small following. Malende was the only woman member of the legal team of presidential candidate Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu and only posted about her campaign trail on rare occasions. In stark contrast, Nabilah Naggayi Sempala, the sole female contender in the Kampala Mayoral Race, mainly used Facebook as a platform for engagement. Her campaign page had more than 40,000 followers and was updated on a daily basis with information about her campaign trail and plan for the city.

While the women campaigning in the general elections turned to social media, the levels of interaction and audience engagement remained much lower than those of their male counterparts, including those with small audiences. Comments on the various women candidate pages came with negative connotations, pointing to their inability to hold positions.

²⁷ Honourable Anite was attacked severally for her views but as an incumbent many voters were not happy with her service and used social media to vent their grievances towards her.

Often, commentators used the opportunity to remind the women of their place outside of politics thus reinforcing many existing stereotypical narratives. All this points to how social media is being used to enhance online violence against women and trivialise their message by portraying them as less credible.



A reminder of gender roles and stereotypes

One female candidate reported that she was often reminded of her cultural values whenever she posted updates about her political interests and activities. She was branded “ill-mannered” for her political views and positions and was sometimes frustrated by even those she thought were there to support her cause.



Among those interviewed, the sentiments were similar with many pointing to misogyny in response to their online activity of candidatures.

..I am contesting in an urban setting and the question I keep getting is whether as a young woman, I will still be marriageable enough when I get into office. The situation is even more challenging for single mothers who seek political office. In political spaces, patriarchy is at its highest. The space is toxic for any young woman. There will be a lot of judgment about how you dress or look. There is no woman in the political space who has not experienced abuse because of her dressing or status or looks. Social construct has affected women's participation in political spaces.

Rebecca Adile Achom Woman Councilor candidate for Nakawa Division, Kampala 2021²⁸



With more than 1.7 billion users, Facebook is considered among the top social media platforms, making it an essential tool for public figures seeking a presence on social media. Moreover, Facebook provides substantial support on how to use the platform effectively especially during elections. Unfortunately, the research finds that digital platforms have also become a public sphere in which views that ridicule women are constructed and disseminated through producing gendered stereotypes that undermine the role of women in the political sphere.²⁹ The loose meanings in a sample of Facebook texts analysed as part of the research are indicative of inherent resistance towards women's engagement. Further, there is limited skill or understanding in how to address the hostile environment found online.³⁰

²⁸ E. Lirri, 'Feminist and running for Political Office: A conversation with two women candidates', December 02, 2020 <https://stories4humanrights.com/feminist-and-running-for-political-office-a-conversation-with-two-women-candidates/> accessed on February 13, 2021

²⁹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2014/6/violence-against-women-in-politics> and heres a study on Violence against women in politics online during the COVID-19 lockdowns in Kenya that affirms this research findings here <https://africaninternetrights.org/en/updates/trends-online-violence-against-women-politics-during-covid19-pandemic-kenya>

³⁰ CIPESA, In Search of Safe Spaces Online, https://cipesa.org/?wpfb_dl=404

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Now more than ever women have been forced to use digital platforms to communicate to the electorate. The pandemic has only served to further widen the digital divide amidst increased digital rights concerns. As such, Uganda's election served to show that the government needs to intervene to level up the playing field for female aspirants of public office who have been unable to participate on digital platforms due to the violence meted out to them in addition to deeply entrenched social and political mores. Possible avenues for intervention include raising the visibility of women leaders, passing legislation on gender-based violence online, capacity building in digital security for candidates and wider public sensitisation on women's participation.



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