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AI-Facilitated Abuse and the New Frontiers of Violence against Women in Nigerian Politics.

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Abstract

Despite constitutional guarantees of equal political participation and persistent advocacy by local women's movements for 35 percent affirmative action, women in Nigeria remain severely marginalized in political leadership. While structural, financial, and institutional barriers such as the legislative rejection of the gender equality bills in 2022 are well documented, the evolution of Nigeria's democracy has introduced a dangerous new dimension to gendered political exclusion. This paper examines the emergence of the digital space as a hostile fortress where advanced technologies are weaponized to police and suppress female political actors. This study uses radical feminist theory and online disinhibition theory to examine how artificial intelligence and coordinated online attacks are deployed to inflict psychological harm, damage reputations, and enforce digital gaslighting against women in politics. The paper argues that AI-facilitated abuse constitutes a sophisticated, modern extension of Violence against Women in Politics (VAWIP) aimed at preserving patriarchal gatekeeping. Finally, the study contends that unless digital public spaces are systematically reformed through robust policy and technological accountability, algorithmic violence will continue to subvert female political inclusivity and undermine Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Cyber-aggression, Gender Inclusivity, Nigerian Democracy, VAWIP.

Introduction

The proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies has to a large extent altered modern political communication, governance, and democratic engagement (Russell & Norvig, 2021). By reshaping information ecosystems through automated bot networks, predictive algorithms, and generative media tools, AI has transformed how citizens interact with public institutions and how political actors contest power (Helbing et al., 2019). While these technological developments offer advanced pathways for civic mobilization, they have simultaneously introduced unprecedented vulnerabilities, creating a sophisticated digital frontier for Violence against Women in Politics (VAWIP) (UN Women, 2023). VAWIP represents a serious democratic challenge encompassing physical, psychological, emotional, symbolic, and digital abuses directed at female actors due to their gender identity and political leadership ambitions (Krook & Restrepo Sanín,

2020). Historically in Nigeria, VAWIP manifested through physical election violence, structural marginalization within party hierarchies, and institutional exclusion. However, the rapid democratization of digital tools has facilitated a transition toward technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) that intersects sharply with pre-existing structural inequalities (Falobi, 2025).

AI-facilitated abuse represents the latest iteration of this hostility (Jankowicz et al., 2021). It weaponizes automated systems to execute targeted defamation, algorithmic harassment, and synthetic image-based exploitation against female political candidates and public officials (Broussard, 2023). Deepfake technology alters audiovisual media to fabricate damaging sexual or scandalous content, while AI-driven bot networks automate the spread of gendered misinformation across digital networks (Chesney & Citron, 2019). In Nigeria, this digital hostility overlaps with deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, weak regulatory oversight, and highly polarized electoral ecosystems where misogynistic narratives thrive with limited accountability (Falobi, 2025). Public data indicates that over 80 percent of female parliamentarians face organized digital aggression globally (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022). Rather than engaging female politicians on policy platforms, political adversaries deploy coordinated networks to execute gendered, sexualized, and moralistic attacks designed to raise the social and psychological costs of female political participation (Jankowicz et al., 2021).

While existing scholarly literature extensively documents how patriarchal social structures, electoral violence, financial constraints, and institutional discrimination impede Nigerian women politically (Adamu, 2023; Okedele, 2024; Ugwu & Okoye, 2022), a significant scholarly gap remains regarding the strategic weaponization of generative software, deepfake manipulation, and algorithmic hate distribution within sub-Saharan Africa's largest democracy. Previous studies predominantly treat online harassment as generalized cyberbullying, failing to capture how algorithmic tools specifically automate, scale, and disguise patriarchal gatekeeping. Furthermore, political parties and electoral oversight bodies in Nigeria lack empirical tracking of technological weaponization, while primary digital statutes like the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 exhibit severe regulatory deficits regarding generative AI abuses (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015a).

To bridge these critical gaps, the primary aim of this study is to systematically examine how AI-facilitated abuse operates as an emerging, systemic barrier to female political participation and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the specific manifestations and mechanisms of AI-facilitated abuse deployed against female political actors in Nigeria?

2. How do AI architectures and digital networks amplify traditional patriarchal structures of political exclusion?
3. What are the legal, regulatory, and institutional deficits within Nigeria's governance frameworks regarding technology-facilitated political violence?

This study makes a distinct contribution to political science and gender scholarship by offering a contextually grounded conceptualization of algorithmic VAWIP tailored to Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of online toxicity, the article extends radical feminist theory into digital domains by demonstrating that AI is not a neutral tool, but an automated mechanism for preserving male hegemony, enforcing patriarchal gatekeeping, and subverting female political inclusivity in the democratic public square.

Conceptual and Literature Review

AI-Facilitated Abuse and Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence

AI-facilitated abuse refers to the strategic deployment of artificial intelligence technologies to perpetrate harmful, manipulative, intimidating, or exploitative actions against individuals within digital spaces (Broussard, 2023). This contemporary form of violence includes automated cyber harassment, online stalking, deepfake manipulation, algorithmic discrimination, identity theft, image-based abuse, and coordinated misinformation campaigns. Unlike conventional digital harassment, AI-facilitated violence possesses unmatched speed, anonymity, and scalability, allowing abusive content to be amplified indefinitely across multiple platforms (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). As a continuum of violence, it extends offline gender inequalities directly into the digital ecosystem (True, 2022). Emerging artificial intelligence systems and algorithmic amplification intensify harassment by providing perpetrators with unprecedented scale, speed, and anonymity, transforming isolated trolling into systemic digital warfare (Henry & Powell, 2018).

Women's Political Participation in Nigeria

Women's political participation denotes the meaningful involvement of women in governance, policymaking, political party administration, electoral contests, and civic decision-making processes (UN Women, 2023). In Nigeria, women constitute about half of the country's population and play significant roles across all spheres of society.

Despite these significant roles, which often go unacknowledged, they face discrimination in political spaces and remain marginalized in political decision-making positions. The Nigerian constitution provides for the rights of women to vote and be voted for, just like their male counterparts. Advocacy efforts by local women's movements have consistently demanded at least 35 percent representation for women on the political terrain as stipulated by the National Gender Policy, recognizing this minimum threshold as a prerequisite for the impact of women's presence in political leadership to be felt. Despite these advocacy efforts, lawmakers in the National Assembly rejected the gender equality bills in 2022. Consequently, Nigeria ranks near the bottom of global indexes for female parliamentary representation, falling behind dozens of other African nations, with women's representation in the lower house being 4.2 percent and 3.7 percent in the upper house (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2026). The rise of algorithmic abuse introduces a new, invisible structural barrier that compounds pre-existing inequalities by generating hostile online environments that actively discourage female political ambition.

Digital Political Violence, Deepfakes, and Gendered Disinformation

The intersection of digital technology, political harassment, and gender exclusion has attracted extensive global and regional scholarly inquiry. Violence against female political actors is fundamentally strategic, serving as an instrument to deter women from claiming space within male-dominated political institutions (Krook, 2020). A particularly dangerous dimension of this threat is deepfake technology. The creation of non-consensual synthetic media and altered visual content targets women disproportionately, causing severe reputational and privacy violations that destroy public trust (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This reality is exacerbated by broader trends in surveillance and data weaponization, where algorithmic architectures manipulate behavioral data to modify public perception and suppress dissent (Zuboff, 2019).

In Nigeria, social media ecosystems have become complex sites of simultaneous empowerment and oppression where misogynistic narratives thrive unchecked due to structural and legal enforcement gaps (Falobi, 2025.). Gendered disinformation relies on false sex-based narratives to shape public opinion and discourage women from democratic participation while deepfakes act as layered communicative objects combining visual similarity, fabricated associations, and cultural stereotypes that remain difficult for ordinary audiences to detect quickly during high-stakes political contests (Mahmud, Ogunbodede & Ewata, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

To evaluate the operational mechanics and systemic implications of AI-facilitated abuse in Nigerian politics, this study synthesizes Radical Feminist Theory and Online Disinhibition Theory (Beauvoir, 1949; Friedan, 1963; Suler, 2004; Wollstonecraft,

1792/2009). Rooted in foundational and contemporary gender scholarship, feminist theory analyzes how patriarchal power structures systematically institutionalize inequalities between men and women across social, economic, and political domains (Tong & Botts, 2018; Walby, 1990). Radical feminist thought posits that patriarchal systems deploy systemic violence as a deliberate mechanism of control to preserve male hegemony and police boundaries of public authority (Walby, 1990). In this study, radical feminist theory is operationally applied through five core analytical concepts.

First, patriarchal gatekeeping analyzes how political elites use digital tools to preserve male dominance over governance structures and exclude women from leadership positions. Second, gendered political exclusion evaluates how online hostility deliberately increases the social, psychological, and reputational costs of political participation for female candidates. Third, the control of female identity and morality assesses how digital attacks focus disproportionately on physical appearance, marital status, and sexual purity rather than policy competence. Fourth, the reproduction of structural inequalities investigates how automated technologies reinforce offline institutional exclusions, such as the 2022 legislative rejection of gender equality bills. Fifth, the unequal distribution of technological power examines how digital assets, troll networks, and algorithmic tools are weaponized by male-dominated political machinery against female aspirants. The digital targeting of Nigerian female politicians is thus conceptualized not as random incivility, but as a modern, technologically mediated expression of patriarchal gatekeeping where AI tools modernize pre-existing patterns of structural oppression (Tong & Botts, 2018).

Propounded by Suler (2004), online disinhibition theory explains why individuals display significantly higher levels of aggression, hostility, and uninhibited behavior in digital environments compared to face-to-face interactions. Suler (2004) identifies key psychological factors including dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and the minimization of authority as primary catalysts that erode normal social restraints online. In the Nigerian digital public space, political actors exploit online anonymity and automated systems such as bots, fake accounts, and digital mercenary networks to launch vicious character assassination campaigns without fear of legal or social repercussions.

Methodology

To systematically investigate the emerging digital frontier of political warfare against women, this study adopts a qualitative desk review design. A desk-based qualitative approach is exceptionally appropriate and methodologically necessary for this inquiry because AI-facilitated political abuse is a rapidly evolving, covert, and dispersed phenomenon. Unlike traditional political behavior that can be directly observed through polling or structured interviews, algorithmic harassment, closed-network WhatsApp voice-cloning, and automated bot operations leave dispersed digital footprints. A

qualitative desk review enables the systematic synthesis of secondary evidence scattered across peer-reviewed academic journals, statutory legal frameworks, policy whitepapers, civil society documentation, and verified election monitoring reports, providing a comprehensive macro-level mapping that isolated primary methods could not achieve.

- **Data Sources**

Data collection was conducted through a multi-database search strategy executed across four primary academic electronic repositories: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and the UN/IPU Digital Library, alongside official governmental and civil society online portals. The search strategy utilized targeted combinations of Boolean operators and controlled keywords designed to capture the intersection of artificial intelligence, gender violence, and political participation in Nigeria:

“Artificial Intelligence” or “AI” or “Deepfakes” or “Bot networks” or “Algorithmic violence”

“Violence against Women in Politics” or “VAWIP” or “Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence”

“Nigeria” or “Nigerian Politics” or “West Africa”

The search and selection process was governed by inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure high empirical relevance. The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly articles focusing on digital gender violence, political communication, and African electoral politics; (2) statutory legal instruments and official policy documents of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; (3) institutional research reports published by recognized bodies such as UN Women, UNESCO, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and the dRPC; and (4) documented media monitoring reports and civil society whitepapers examining Nigerian general elections. Conversely, the exclusion criteria filtered out non-English publications, opinion-based blogs or journalistic commentaries lacking empirical or institutional attribution, and studies focusing purely on commercial cybercrime or deepfake engineering without any political, sociological, or gender dimensions.

- **Timeframe**

The review temporally bounded its scope to literature, legal documents, and official institutional reports covering the decade from 2015 to 2025. This specific temporal framework is critical as it spans from the enactment of Nigeria's primary foundational

digital legislation (the Cybercrimes Act of 2015) up to the post-2023 election cycles that witnessed the rapid proliferation and weaponization of generative AI technologies in Nigerian political communication. Following initial database identification, duplicate screening, and rigorous application of inclusion and exclusion parameters, a final corpus of 15 primary documents was selected for qualitative synthesis, comprising 7 peer-reviewed scholarly articles, 3 statutory acts and policy frameworks, 5 institutional research reports, and 4 documented election monitoring summaries.

- **Analytical Strategy and Source Credibility**

The selected documentary corpus was subjected to qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis. Guided by the study's radical feminist theoretical framework, data coding was structured around four core analytical categories: (1) technological manifestations of abuse, (2) mechanisms of patriarchal gatekeeping, (3) psychological and political impacts on female leadership, and (4) statutory and regulatory gaps. To establish the credibility, reliability, and validity of the secondary evidence, the authors employed methodological triangulation; cross-verifying academic findings against official statutory texts, verified international institutional datasets, and domestic civil society election observations to eliminate single-source bias and ensure robust, verifiable qualitative interpretations.

Findings and Discussion

The systematic qualitative synthesis of the documentary corpus reveals that artificial intelligence and digital platforms are deeply intertwined with political processes in Nigeria, functioning not merely as neutral communication tools, but as sophisticated vectors of political exclusion. The empirical evidence is structured below across the thematic areas.

- **Trolling and Coordinated Cyber Aggression**

The findings indicate that malicious actors deploy organized troll networks and coordinated bot operations to flood digital spaces with misogynistic abuse, harassment, and intimidation aimed at female politicians and activists (Development Research and Projects Centre (dRPC), 2025; Idowu et al., 2026). This operationalizes the radical feminist concept of patriarchal gatekeeping, wherein coordinated digital hostility functions as an institutionalized mechanism to enforce traditional gender hierarchies and “punish” women who transgress into male-dominated political spheres. As documented in recent empirical assessments on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, these campaigns are designed to exhaust targets emotionally and force their retreat from public discourse, effectively silencing feminist advocacy and political participation.

- **Deepfakes and Voice-Cloning Manipulation**

The data highlights the weaponization of generative AI voice-cloning applications and deepfake video synthesis to fabricate compromising audio and visual content depicting female leaders (dRPC, 2025). These synthetic files are predominantly injected into closed-network applications like WhatsApp, which functions as a core infrastructure of political communication and informal campaigning across communities, allowing them to bypass mainstream content moderation and spread rapidly (Cheeseman et al., 2020). This technological manipulation directly reflects the radical feminist perspective on the bodily and psychological policing of women, weaponizing fabricated sexualized or moralistic misconduct to destroy credibility and enforce compliance through digital gaslighting. Such tactics inflict immediate reputational damage before verified disclaimers can be issued (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Idowu et al., 2026).

- **Image Manipulation and Gendered Disinformation**

Gendered disinformation relies on false sex-based narratives to shape public opinion and discourage women from democratic participation, while altered images act as layered communicative objects combining visual similarity, fabricated associations, and cultural stereotypes that remain difficult for ordinary audiences to detect quickly during high-stakes political contests (Mahmud, Ogunbodede & Ewata, 2025; dRPC, 2025). In Nigeria's conservative electoral landscape, attacks targeting a woman's moral status or marital purity function as immediate political barriers. By exploiting underlying high-engagement social media algorithms, these altered assets achieve massive virality within hours, weaponizing cultural taboos to execute rapid character assassination. As documented by Ogunsakin and Ogunsakin (2023), digital technology-aided gender-based violence severely impacts women's psychological well-being and social standing by leveraging online platforms to perpetuate harassment, intimidation, and reputational damage. This dynamic exemplifies the radical feminist critique of media objectification, where visual distortions reduce female political actors to sexualized caricatures to delegitimize their intellectual and leadership capacities. This continuous devaluation reinforces systemic barriers and undermines substantive democratic representation across Nigeria (Idowu et al., 2026).

Applying the operationalized radical feminist framework demonstrates that AI architectures do not operate in a vacuum; they automate and scale pre-existing patriarchal structures of exclusion. Table 1 below illustrates how offline patriarchal barriers are amplified through technological mechanisms to produce severe gendered consequences for female political figures.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework of AI-Facilitated Abuse as an Instrument of Patriarchal Gatekeeping

Offline Patriarchal Structures	AI-Facilitated Amplification Mechanism	Impact on Female Political Actors
Sociocultural stereotypes regarding female virtue	Synthetic audio and WhatsApp voice cloning	Severe psychological trauma and distress
Male-dominated party gatekeeping	Coordinated bot networks and troll farming	Targeted character assassination
Institutional exclusion (e.g., rejection of 2022 Gender Bills)	Algorithmic distribution of gendered disinformation	Political self-censorship and public withdrawal

This digital hostility is directly linked to offline institutional closures. The institutional blockades that culminated in the legislative rejection of the gender equality bills by the National Assembly in 2022 sent a clear structural signal across the political spectrum. By codifying a lack of state commitment to gender equity, this institutional closure gave a green light to political actors to deploy harsher, automated digital tactics during subsequent electoral cycles, knowing that state defense mechanisms for women were practically non-existent.

- **Legal and Institutional Deficits in Nigeria**

Nigeria possesses several legal instruments designed to combat criminality, yet these frameworks exhibit severe gaps regarding automated abuses driven by artificial intelligence. While Section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015a) criminalizes cyberstalking and identity theft, the legislation lacks explicit statutory definitions, technical clarity, or penalties for deepfake manipulation, generative media forgery, or automated bot networks. Although the Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2015b) provides protections against emotional and psychological violence, practical enforcement is severely hindered because law enforcement agencies lack specialized digital forensic capabilities to trace anonymous and algorithmic architectures. Moreover, technology-facilitated political violence remains entirely absent from mainstream state gender strategies and electoral security guidelines, leaving female aspirants without institutional support or rapid response protection mechanisms during election campaigns.

Synthesizing these insights through the theoretical lenses adopted in this study, the findings confirm that AI-facilitated abuse operates not merely as a new technological tool,

but as a qualitative expansion of Violence against Women in Politics (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020). Interpreted through radical feminist theory, algorithmic harassment functions as automated patriarchal gatekeeping (Walby, 1990). By systematically targeting female political figures with deepfakes, synthetic audio, and coordinated trolling, male-dominated political structures successfully shift public focus from female policy competence to moral and sexual scrutiny (Jankowicz et al., 2021). Furthermore, online disinhibition theory elucidates how the structural features of digital platforms; anonymity, speed, and asynchronous reach allow political adversaries to deploy digital mercenaries without immediate accountability (Suler, 2004). Consequently, technology-facilitated gender violence operates as an unpunished strategy of political suppression, directly subverting local advocacy efforts for 35 percent affirmative action and undermining democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The integration of artificial intelligence into the public space has redefined the parameters of political engagement in Nigeria, creating an aggressive frontier of violence against women in politics. Leaving the digital sphere unregulated allows advanced technology to reinforce patriarchal gatekeeping, inflict psychological trauma, and silence female leadership. Protecting the integrity of Nigeria's democracy necessitates transitioning from passive observation to proactive technological, legal, and institutional defense. Without robust policy accountability, algorithmic violence will continue to subvert female political inclusivity and impair democratic consolidation. Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommended:

1. There is a need for legislative reform, hence, it becomes expedient for the National Assembly to amend the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 to introduce explicit statutory definitions for generative AI abuses, establishing severe criminal penalties for political deepfakes, voice cloning, and automated gendered harassment.

2. The Federal Government should build forensic capacity by establishing specialized cyber-gender units within law enforcement agencies, equipping them with digital forensic tools to trace anonymous bot networks and synthetic media creators.

3. Regulatory bodies will ensure accountability mechanisms are set up by mandating international social media corporations to optimize content moderation algorithms for regional Nigerian languages and cultural contexts to intercept deepfakes and gendered disinformation.

4. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should incorporate technology-facilitated gender-based violence into its electoral monitoring

frameworks, penalizing political parties and candidates who deploy automated troll farms or synthetic media against opponents.

5. Civil society organizations and political parties must conduct digital security workshops for female aspirants, equipping them with media verification tools, digital asset security, and rapid-response strategies.

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