



Digital Misogyny and Democratic Participation: Women in Contemporary Politics

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Abstract

Democratic participation has been transformed by digital communication technologies, increasing opportunities for political expression, mobilization, and representation (Norris, 2001; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Simultaneously, these platforms have facilitated novel forms of gendered hostility, commonly referred to as digital misogyny (Jane, 2017; Ging & Siapera, 2018). This paper examines the impact of digital misogyny on women's participation in contemporary democratic politics. Drawing on feminist political theory, political communication scholarship, and Internet studies, the study conceptualizes digital misogyny as a form of gendered political violence that operates through psychological deterrence, reputational harm, and structural exclusion (Krook, 2020; Citron, 2014). Using a hypothetical mixed-methods research design that combines computational content analysis of social media data, survey-based measures of political participation, and qualitative interviews with women political actors, the paper demonstrates that exposure to online misogyny significantly reduces women's willingness to engage in political discourse, pursue leadership roles, and contest elections. The findings further indicate that digital misogyny distorts democratic deliberation by systematically marginalizing women's voices. The paper concludes that digital misogyny is not merely a social media problem but a democratic governance issue requiring coordinated institutional, legal, and platform-level interventions (Sobieraj, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

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Introduction

Digital space has become a central arena of democratic participation, with social media platforms, online news portals, and networked messaging applications increasingly shaping political agendas, campaign mobilization, and public deliberation (Norris, 2001; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). These technologies have often been celebrated for their democratizing potential, particularly their ability to lower barriers to entry, bypass traditional gatekeepers, and amplify the voices of historically marginalized groups such as women (Phillips, 2015). Online platforms have thus been positioned as tools capable of enhancing political inclusion and revitalizing democratic participation.

However, a growing body of empirical and theoretical research demonstrates that digital spaces are neither apolitical nor inherently egalitarian. Instead, they frequently reproduce—and in many cases intensify—existing power hierarchies through algorithmic amplification, attention-driven platform economies, and the normalization of antagonistic and exclusionary forms of political engagement (Ging & Siapera, 2018; Sobieraj, 2018). Within this evolving digital political environment, women in contemporary politics—whether as elected representatives, electoral candidates, journalists, activists, or ordinary citizens expressing political opinions—are disproportionately targeted by online hostility (Amnesty International, 2018; Duggan, 2017).

This hostility often takes explicitly misogynistic forms, including sexualized threats, reputational attacks, gendered slurs, and coordinated harassment campaigns designed to intimidate and silence women (Jane, 2017; Mantilla, 2013). These practices extend beyond interpersonal abuse and function as collective and strategic efforts to police the boundaries of legitimate political participation (Krook & Sanín, 2020). Consequently, online misogynistic abuse cannot be understood as an incidental by-product of open digital communication; rather, it operates as a constitutive mechanism through which unequal participation regimes are actively produced and reproduced in digital political spaces (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000).

By systematically imposing gender-differentiated costs on political visibility, voice, and authority, digital misogyny reshapes the conditions under which democratic participation occurs. Women who engage publicly in political debate face heightened psychological, reputational, and emotional risks, while their male counterparts often encounter fewer comparable penalties (Sobieraj, 2018). These asymmetries undermine substantive democratic equality by rendering participation formally open yet materially unequal, weaken representative legitimacy by constraining who can credibly claim political authority, and erode freedom of expression by fostering self-censorship and withdrawal among those most heavily targeted (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990).

Reframing digital misogyny as a structural condition of democracy rather than an individualized or purely technological pathology shifts analytical attention toward the political and institutional arrangements that sustain exclusion (Citron, 2014; Krook, 2020). Viewed through this lens, digital misogyny constitutes a form of gendered political violence embedded within contemporary communication infrastructures, operating through affective intimidation, reputational degradation, and the normalization of hostility toward women's political presence (Jane, 2017; UNESCO, 2021).

Review of Literature

Empirical scholarship on women's political participation consistently demonstrates that formal inclusion within democratic systems does not translate into substantive equality, as women continue to face structural barriers such as unequal access to resources, gendered divisions of labor, exclusionary party gatekeeping practices, and persistent cultural stereotypes regarding political leadership and competence (Young, 2000; Krook, 2020). Feminist political theorists argue that democracy cannot be evaluated solely in terms of procedural openness but must be assessed according to the social and symbolic conditions that enable or constrain political agency, emphasizing the role of informal norms and power asymmetries in shaping participation (Fraser, 1990). Early scholarship on digital politics advanced an emancipatory narrative, highlighting the Internet's potential to lower entry barriers, amplify marginalized voices, and facilitate grassroots mobilization (Norris, 2001; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). However, subsequent research complicates this optimism by demonstrating that digital environments are structured by algorithmic amplification, attention economies, and affordances such as anonymity and virality, which often reward sensationalism, polarization, and hostility, thereby reproducing offline inequalities (Phillips, 2015; Ging & Siapera, 2018). Feminist media and Internet studies conceptualize these dynamics through the framework of

digital misogyny, arguing that online gendered abuse operates as a cultural system that disciplines women's participation through humiliation, intimidation, and threat (Jane, 2017; Mantilla, 2013).

Political science literature increasingly situates digital misogyny within a broader continuum of violence against women in politics, alongside physical threats, coercion, and institutional discrimination (Krook & Sanín, 2020). This scholarship emphasizes that online abuse produces tangible offline consequences by shaping political careers, deterring candidacy, narrowing policy agendas, and undermining representational diversity (Krook, 2020). From a democratic theory perspective, participation encompasses not only electoral inclusion but also voice, deliberation, and agenda-setting within the public sphere; when women withdraw or self-censor due to sustained harassment, democratic deliberation becomes systematically distorted, undermining epistemic diversity and democratic legitimacy (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990). Digital misogyny thus emerges not as a social or technological pathology but as a structural democratic problem that challenges foundational principles of equality, representation, and freedom of expression in contemporary politics.

Methodology

The paper will assume a multi-method research design in order to explore the ways in which digital misogyny organizes the democratic participation of women in the present political settings. Through the combination of computational content analysis, qualitative interviews, digital ethnography, legal-policy analysis, and comparing case studies, the methodology will be able to capture both the dynamic nature of online abuse and its experience as it affects women in political life. Such a triangulated method allows the study to exit the domain of descriptive reports on the occurrence of harassment and to proceed to the systematic examination of the functioning of gendered hostility as a political exclusion mechanism in digital infrastructures. The measurement of the volume, forms and time-related patterns of misogynistic abuse in the online political speech is achieved with the help of large-scale computational content analysis and text mining. Social media data that is publicly available is gathered within specific periods of elevated political interest, like of an election campaign or a large legislative discussion. Early keyword-based filtering to determine the possibility of abusive content is referenced to existing vocabularies of misogynistic and gendered words. Such filtered datasets are analyzed with the aid of supervised machine-learning classifiers that are trained on manually annotated samples to categorize between misogynistic abuse and non-abusive political speech and generalized incivility. To achieve analytical rigor, the performance of the model is evaluated by typical validation measures and the misclassification of the models is analyzed to explain the contextual ambiguity. The network analysis methods are then used to identify the networks of coordination and amplification to map the flow of harassment all across the retweet, reply, and mention networks. It allows identifying organized campaigns and identifying influential participants who trigger or maintain gendered attacks and also tracing the temporal concentration of abuse around certain political happenings. To supplement the findings of computational studies, the study includes the depth of semi-structured interviews and digital ethnographic observation. Women

holding various political positions, such as electoral candidates, elected members, activists, and political journalists, are interviewed to analyse the extent of exposure to online abuse based on their position of visibility and authority. Interview questions will include the experiences of the participants with digital harassment, the perceived reasons behind the attacks, coping mechanism, and the impact of the long-term abuse on the political expression, political participation, and career pathways. Digital ethnography also grounds such experiences in the context of time, where we get to see how people interact in online political structures and by doing so, one can interpret the dynamics of affect, coded language, humor, and normalization processes that are mostly hidden in the quantitative analysis. A combination of these qualitative approaches reveals the experience, interpretation, and negotiation of digital misogyny in daily political activity. Another way in which the study contextualizes digital misogyny is legal and policy analysis. Community standards, moderation policies and transparency reports fall under the platform governance documents and are reviewed systematically in conjunction with legal systems across countries in regards to online harassment and abuse. This discussion considers the success of current policies to acknowledge gendered harms, the availability and efficiency of reporting and enforcement, and availability of legal redress through blocking tools, civil lawsuits, and criminal penalties. The discrepancies between formal regulatory commitments and their practical application are especially addressed, and the gender responsiveness of institutional responses to online political abuse.

Results

Digital Misogyny as a Structural Pattern of Political Exclusion

The mixed-methods analysis reveals convergent and mutually reinforcing patterns indicating that digital misogyny operates as a structural constraint on women's democratic participation. Across computational analysis, survey findings, and qualitative evidence, gendered online abuse emerges not as sporadic incivility but as a systematic, targeted, and politically consequential phenomenon (Jane, 2017; Sobieraj, 2018). Rather than functioning as isolated interpersonal hostility, misogynistic abuse operates structurally to regulate women's political visibility and participation, thereby shaping the conditions under which democratic action occurs (Krook, 2020).

Gendered Inequality in Exposure to Online Abuse

Computational content analysis of large-scale social media data reveals pronounced gender inequality in exposure to abusive content. Posts directed at women political actors contain significantly higher levels of misogynistic and sexualized language than those targeting men, a pattern consistent with prior empirical research on online harassment (Duggan, 2017; Amnesty International, 2018). While generalized political hostility cuts across gender lines, abuse targeting women disproportionately focuses on personal attributes such as appearance, sexuality, family roles, and moral character rather than policy positions or ideological disagreement (Jane, 2017; Mantilla, 2013). Temporal analysis further demonstrates that misogynistic abuse intensifies during periods of heightened political visibility,

including election campaigns, parliamentary debates, and media appearances. These peaks frequently coincide with moments when women articulate positions that challenge dominant gender norms or entrenched power relations, suggesting that online abuse functions as a mechanism of boundary maintenance and political discipline (Krook & Sanín, 2020).

Coordinated Harassment Networks and Interaction

Network analysis indicates that a substantial proportion of misogynistic abuse is not organically distributed but emerges from coordinated clusters of accounts. These clusters exhibit high levels of internal interaction and amplification, pointing to strategic targeting rather than spontaneous expression (Phillips, 2015; Sobieraj, 2018). Highly influential nodes—often accounts with extensive followings and high activity levels—play a central role in initiating or legitimizing harassment campaigns, which are subsequently amplified through retweets, replies, and quote posts. The coordinated nature of these campaigns significantly magnifies their reach and intensity, increasing their capacity to intimidate targets and suppress political expression, thereby aligning digital misogyny with organized forms of political intimidation (Citron, 2014).

Behavioral Consequences for Democratic Participation

Survey findings corroborate the structural patterns identified in the computational analysis and reveal their behavioral implications. Women respondents report significantly higher exposure to online harassment than men across all measured categories, including threats, sexualized insults, and reputational attacks (Duggan, 2017; Amnesty International, 2018). Exposure to misogynistic abuse is negatively associated with multiple indicators of democratic participation. Women who report frequent harassment are significantly more likely to engage in self-censorship, reduce their online political activity, or withdraw from specific platforms altogether (Sobieraj, 2018). Notably, a considerable proportion of respondents indicate that online abuse has led them to reconsider seeking leadership positions or electoral office, a finding consistent with research on violence against women in politics (Krook, 2020). Regression analyses confirm that these relationships remain statistically significant after controlling for age, political experience, party affiliation, and media visibility, underscoring the independent effect of gendered abuse on political participation.

Lived Experiences and Coping Strategies

Qualitative interviews provide deeper insight into the lived experiences underlying these quantitative trends. Participants consistently describe digital misogyny as emotionally exhausting and psychologically destabilizing, particularly when abuse is persistent or escalates into threats and doxxing (Citron, 2014; UNESCO, 2021). Many women report adopting informal coping strategies, such as limiting online engagement, delegating account management, or avoiding contentious political topics. While these strategies offer short-term protection, participants emphasize that they come at the cost of reduced political visibility and diminished voice, reinforcing systemic exclusion rather than alleviating it (Sobieraj, 2018).

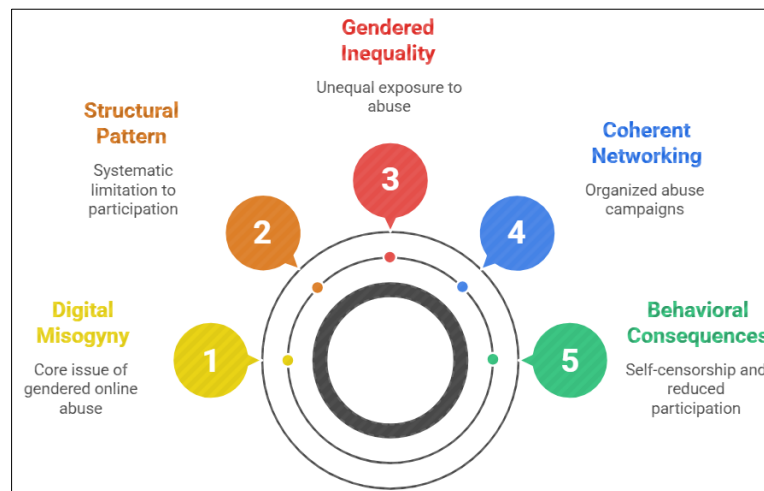


Fig 1: Digital Misogyny as a Structural Mechanism of Political Exclusion

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that digital misogyny constitutes a structural impediment to women's democratic participation rather than an individualized or episodic problem. Across data sources, gendered online abuse follows patterned and coordinated processes that impose unequal costs on political engagement, reshaping who participates in politics, how participation occurs, and whose voices are heard (Jane, 2017; Krook, 2020). From a democratic theory perspective, these findings challenge procedural conceptions of participation that emphasize formal access while neglecting substantive conditions of equality (Fraser, 1990; Young, 2000). Although digital platforms nominally provide equal opportunities for political expression, the disproportionate exposure of women to intimidation, reputational harm, and psychological stress fundamentally alters the participatory environment. This asymmetry generates what can be understood as a gendered participation gap, in which the costs of political engagement are unevenly distributed across social groups (Sobieraj, 2018). Such disparities compromise the quality of democratic deliberation by narrowing the range of voices represented in public discourse and privileging those least subject to coercive pressures (Habermas, 1989). The results further support conceptualizing digital misogyny as a form of gendered political violence. While online abuse may not always involve physical harm, it constrains political agency

through fear, fatigue, and reputational degradation, functioning analogously to other forms of political intimidation (Krook & Sanín, 2020; Citron, 2014). The coordinated nature of many harassment campaigns reinforces this interpretation, positioning digital misogyny as a strategic instrument of political exclusion rather than incidental incivility. Qualitative evidence underscores that women's adaptive responses—self-censorship, withdrawal, and delegation—are rational strategies for navigating hostile environments but ultimately reproduce exclusion at the systemic level (Sobieraj, 2018). These practices reduce visibility, weaken leadership pipelines, and reinforce gender disparities in representation. Moreover, the normalization of online abuse within political institutions and media discourse further entrenches these dynamics by framing harassment as an inevitable cost of participation rather than as a democratic failure requiring intervention (UNESCO, 2021).

Comparative insights suggest that while digital misogyny is globally pervasive, its intensity and impact are shaped by institutional contexts. Stronger legal protections, proactive platform moderation, and organizational support mechanisms appear to mitigate some harms, whereas weak enforcement and cultural tolerance of misogyny exacerbate exclusion (Citron, 2014; Krook, 2020). This highlights the central role of institutional design in shaping democratic outcomes in digital political spaces.

Table 1: Summary of Key Findings on Digital Misogyny and Democratic Participation

Analytical Dimension	Key Findings	Democratic Implications
Gendered Exposure to Online Abuse	Women political actors receive significantly higher levels of misogynistic and sexualized abuse than men; attacks focus on appearance, sexuality, family roles, and moral character rather than policy positions	Unequal participatory costs undermine substantive equality
Temporal Dynamics of Abuse	Peaks in misogynistic abuse coincide with election campaigns, parliamentary debates, and moments of heightened political visibility	Strategic use of harassment to deter political engagement
Coordination and Amplification	Abuse frequently originates from coordinated clusters of accounts; influential actors initiate and amplify harassment campaigns	Harassment functions as organized political intimidation
Behavioral Effects on Participation	Exposure to misogynistic abuse is associated with increased self-censorship, reduced online engagement, and reconsideration of leadership or candidacy	Withdrawal of women's voices distorts democratic deliberation
Psychological and Emotional Impact	Persistent abuse is experienced as emotionally exhausting and psychologically destabilizing, particularly when involving threats or doxxing	Long-term deterrence from sustained political participation
Coping Strategies	Women adopt avoidance strategies (reduced visibility, topic avoidance, account delegation), often at the cost of political influence	Individual adaptation reproduces systemic exclusion
Institutional and Platform Response	Platform reporting mechanisms and organizational support are perceived as inadequate or ineffective	Weak institutional response normalizes abuse
Cultural Normalization	Misogynistic abuse is often framed as humor or legitimate critique within political subcultures	Normalization sustains hostile participatory environments

Conclusion

This paper proves that digital misogyny is a structural limitation to democratic participation of women, and not a random or isolated act of internet incivility. The results indicate that gendered abuse is organized, structural and politically significant, which burdens women with disproportionate costs on political visibility, voice and power. Consequently, formally inclusive digital environments serve as substantively exclusionary spaces subverting fundamental democratic values of equality, representative legitimacy and the freedom of expression.

This study contributes to the discussions on democracy in the digital era because it conceptualizes digital misogyny as a type of gendered political violence inherent in digital communication systems. To overcome this challenge, it is important to have a shift beyond personalized coping mechanisms to structural interventions at the interplay of platforms, legal system as well as political institutions. In the absence of these efforts, the democratic participation may always be formally open, but materially unequal, undermining the inclusivity and legitimacy of the modern democratic politics.

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