



THE IMPACT OF GENDERED DISINFORMATION TARGETING WOMEN IN TANZANIA:

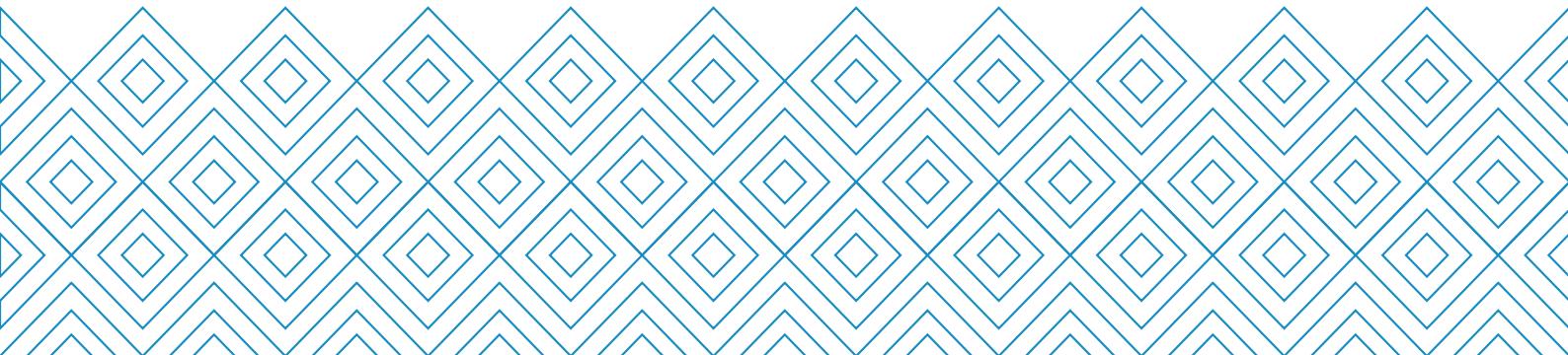
The Case Study of General Election 2025

REPORT

November 2025

Table of Contents

	Page No.
<u>Acknowledgment</u>	3
<u>Executive Summary</u>	3
<u>1. Introduction</u>	4
<u>2. Methodology</u>	4
<u>3. Study Findings</u>	5
- Gendered Disinformation is Widespread	6
- Severity of Impact	6
- Areas Most Affected	7
- Responsibility for Change	7
<u>4. How Social Media Platforms Amplify Gendered Disinformation</u>	7
<u>5. The Impact of Gendered Disinformation</u>	7
<u>6. Legal and Policy Gaps</u>	8
<u>7. Recommendations</u>	8
<u>8. Conclusion</u>	9
<u>A. Tanzania context</u>	9
<u>B. International institutions & global policy frameworks</u>	10
<u>C. Regional & African studies</u>	10
<u>D. Digital disinformation, safety & technology sources</u>	10
<u>E. Academic research on online harassment, gender & harm</u>	10



► Acknowledgment

Zaina Foundation extends its sincere appreciation to the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) for supporting this important research initiative. APC's commitment to advancing feminist digital rights and building safer, more inclusive online spaces was instrumental in enabling this study.

We also thank the women leaders, journalists, activists, and community members who generously shared their experiences and insights.

Their voices and stories are central to understanding the scope and severity of gendered disinformation in Tanzania. This report reflects their lived realities and provides evidence that can guide national advocacy, platform accountability, and policy reform efforts.

►Executive Summary

Gendered disinformation has emerged as one of the most pressing digital threats affecting women in Tanzania, particularly during periods of heightened political activity such as the 2025 General Election. This form of digital harm targets women by deploying false, misleading, sexualized, or defamatory content intended to damage their reputation, undermine their public credibility, and discourage them from participating in civic and political life. Unlike general misinformation, gendered disinformation is deeply rooted in structural gender inequalities and reinforces long-standing stereotypes about women's morality, leadership capacity, and societal roles.

This research, conducted by Zaina Foundation from June to November 2025, provides a detailed examination of how gendered disinformation spreads, the platforms through which it gains traction, the impacts it has on women's safety and

participation, and the gaps that currently exist within Tanzania's legal and policy frameworks.

Using a mixed-methods approach that combined a structured survey of 128 individuals with social media monitoring across Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), the study found that gendered disinformation is widespread, normalized, and deeply harmful. Every respondent in the study reported encountering gendered disinformation within the six-month period, with many observing such content repeatedly during political discussions.

The findings reveal that gendered disinformation has profound emotional, psychological, social, and political consequences. It discourages women from engaging in public conversations, silences women in political debates, and limits women's access to leadership opportunities. The study also highlights that current laws do not adequately protect women from gender-targeted digital attacks, leaving them vulnerable and with limited avenues for justice. The report concludes by offering evidence-based recommendations aimed at strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing platform accountability, building women's digital resilience, improving public awareness, and fostering coordinated national action.

1

Introduction

Tanzania's digital landscape has rapidly expanded over the last decade. Increased access to smartphones and social networking platforms has created new opportunities for communication, civic engagement, and political participation. However, alongside these opportunities have emerged serious digital risks, including gendered disinformation that specifically targets women because of their gender and public visibility. Gendered disinformation involves the deliberate creation and spread of false, misleading, sexualized, or manipulated content aimed at damaging women's credibility, dignity, or safety. It weaponizes deeply rooted gender stereotypes and exploits digital platforms to undermine women's voices, especially those who are active in politics, leadership, media, and social activism.

The 2025 General Election environment heightened these risks significantly. As political tensions rose and online debates intensified, social media platforms became fertile ground for orchestrated attacks against women.

These attacks were not accidental but reflected strategic attempts to discredit women's public participation by framing them as immoral, incompetent, or untrustworthy. While women candidates, party members, and journalists were the most visible targets, ordinary women participating in political discussions also found themselves subject to harmful narratives.

This study was therefore undertaken to examine the scale and nature of gendered disinformation during this critical period and to understand its impact on women's participation in public life. By documenting these patterns, Zaina Foundation aims to contribute evidence that informs policy and advocacy efforts at both national and global levels. Gendered disinformation does not merely harm individual women; it poses a systemic threat to democratic participation, freedom of expression, and gender equality. When women withdraw from online spaces or limit their political engagement due to fear of harassment or reputational damage, society loses diverse voices that are essential for inclusive governance. The findings presented in this report underscore the urgent need for legal recognition of gendered digital violence, improved digital literacy, platform accountability, and strengthened protection frameworks. As Tanzania continues to embrace digital transformation, addressing gendered disinformation must become a national priority to ensure that online spaces are inclusive, safe, and reflective of democratic values.

2

Methodology

Zaina Foundation adopted a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture the complexity of gendered disinformation in Tanzania's digital environment. The study was conducted between June 1 and November 17, 2025, covering the pre-election, election, and post-election periods. This timeline allowed us to observe fluctuations in political engagement and the corresponding rise in harmful narratives targeting women.

The first component of the methodology involved a structured survey of 128 respondents drawn from diverse backgrounds, including civil society leaders, journalists, students, public servants, private-sector professionals, activists, and ordinary internet users. The majority of respondents were women, though men and gender-diverse individuals also participated to ensure a balanced understanding of how gendered disinformation is perceived by different groups.

Participants were primarily located in urban centers such as Dar es Salaam, Arusha, Mwanza, and Dodoma, where digital engagement tends to be highest. The survey explored respondents' exposure to gendered disinformation, their perceptions of its impact, their understanding of the platforms where harmful content appears, and their views on who holds responsibility for addressing the issue.

The second component involved systematic monitoring of major social media platforms, including Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X. These platforms were selected because they are widely used across Tanzania and play a significant role in shaping public opinion. The monitoring focused on identifying recurring patterns in harmful narratives, tracking the spread of manipulated or false content, and analyzing the context in which gendered disinformation emerged. We observed how certain posts gained traction, how anonymous accounts contributed to coordinated attacks, and

how content was shared, reshared, or reinterpreted within online communities.

A qualitative analysis of online behaviour provided insights into the subtle and overt ways that gendered disinformation manifests, including through memes, edited images, fabricated screenshots, decontextualized videos, and sensationalized rumours. This method also allowed us to identify linguistic trends and cultural cues specific to Tanzanian online communities, particularly sexist tropes or slang used to delegitimize women.

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Although the study generated rich data, it faced several limitations. Access to WhatsApp groups was restricted due to privacy controls, limiting our ability to document closed-group conversations. Further, women who had experienced severe attacks may have been reluctant to discuss their experiences due to fear of stigma or further harm. Despite these challenges, the methodology provided a sufficiently strong basis to understand both the structural patterns and individual-level impacts of gendered disinformation.

3 | Study Findings

The findings reveal a pervasive and deeply embedded culture of gendered disinformation in Tanzania's digital spaces. Across all study components, gendered disinformation appeared consistently and frequently, especially during political discussions. Respondents emphasized that the problem is not isolated but has become normalized within online interactions. This normalization makes it difficult for the public to distinguish truth from manipulation and contributes to broader societal acceptance of harmful narratives about women.

- Gendered Disinformation is Widespread

Every respondent in the study reported encountering gendered disinformation at least once during the research period, with many describing daily or weekly exposure. The platforms most frequently mentioned—Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and X—acted as primary channels for spreading false or defamatory content. The speed at which harmful content spread was particularly concerning; manipulated images and sexualized rumours often went viral within minutes, amplified by anonymous accounts, coordinated groups, or algorithmic trends.

Respondents described scenarios where a woman's public comment, media appearance, or political statement triggered immediate waves of attack, ranging from sexualized insults to fabricated stories aimed at questioning her character. Some participants noted that fake information was often presented as "breaking news," making it appear credible and increasing the likelihood of it being shared widely.

- Severity of Impact

The emotional and psychological toll of gendered disinformation was evident in respondents' descriptions. Many women reported experiencing anxiety, embarrassment, or a loss of confidence after being targeted by harmful content. For some, the political issues or social relationships, work opportunities, and community standing. The attacks often leveraged the intensity of online hostility, resulting in behaviour, making reputational damage especially severe for women engaged in public or political life.

The study found that gendered disinformation directly discouraged women's participation in online conversations. Several respondents indicated that they now avoid commenting on being targeted by harmful content. For some, the political issues or social relationships, work opportunities, and community standing. The attacks often leveraged the intensity of online hostility, resulting in behaviour, making reputational damage especially severe for women engaged in public or political life.

- Areas Most Affected

Politics emerged as the most affected domain, with more than half of respondents stating that women involved in political activities experienced the highest levels of gendered disinformation. The election environment intensified online attacks, with women candidates, spokespersons, party representatives, and journalists being disproportionately targeted. Gendered narratives were strategically deployed to undermine women's legitimacy, often by questioning their morality, leadership ability, or family roles.

Outside politics, gendered disinformation affected women's social relationships, employment prospects, and educational pathways. Rumours and manipulated images often spread beyond political discussions, permeating community forums, family networks, and professional circles. Young women were particularly vulnerable to such attacks, especially when their digital literacy or access to protective resources was limited.

- Responsibility for Change

Respondents expressed strong views about who should address the problem of gendered disinformation, with the majority emphasizing the need for joint responsibility. Government institutions were seen as central actors responsible for establishing clear laws and enforcing protections, while social media companies were expected to improve content moderation, particularly in Kiswahili. Civil society organizations were recognized for their role in digital rights advocacy, awareness-raising, and capacity-building, while citizens were urged to be more responsible in verifying information before sharing.

How Social Media Platforms Amplify Gendered Disinformation

Social media platforms function as both amplifiers and archives of harmful gendered content. Their algorithms prioritize content that generates strong emotional reactions, making sexualized rumours and sensationalized claims particularly likely to spread widely. This amplification mechanism, combined with the anonymity offered by many platforms, enables harmful narratives to circulate unchecked and remain accessible long after deletion.

One of the most common tactics observed was the circulation of sexualized rumours about women in public life. These rumours often implied that women had advanced professionally or politically through inappropriate or immoral means. The rumours were presented in various formats, including memes, TikTok videos synced with audio implying scandal, and WhatsApp voice notes narrated in a tone meant to mimic insider information. Even when these rumours were entirely fabricated, their repeated circulation caused significant reputational damage.

Manipulated images and videos also played a central role in digital attacks. For example, old photographs were repurposed to suggest new scandals or misdeeds, while edited screenshots were designed to resemble credible news sources, making it difficult for users to distinguish between authentic and manipulated content.

These types of attacks were particularly damaging because visual content tends to be more memorable and more likely to be shared.

Another persistent tactic involved targeting women's family or marital status. Comments often questioned whether a woman was married, whether she was a good mother, or whether she could "balance home responsibilities" with leadership roles. Such attacks draw on deeply entrenched cultural norms about gender and family, reinforcing stereotypes that women's suitability for public roles is determined by their domestic lives.

These patterns illustrate how social media platforms are being used to reinforce gender inequality and silence women's political participation. The nature of these attacks, combined with the platforms' limited capacity or willingness to moderate harmful content in Kiswahili, creates an environment where women are disproportionately vulnerable to disinformation and digital violence.

The Impact of Gendered Disinformation

The impacts of gendered disinformation extend far beyond the immediate harm experienced by targeted women. At an individual level, women described feeling violated, embarrassed, and emotionally distressed. The fear of being targeted discouraged many from participating openly in online discussions, particularly on politically sensitive topics. Women who were attacked often felt unsupported, uncertain about how to report harmful content, and fearful of further consequences if they spoke out publicly.

On a broader societal level, gendered disinformation undermines democratic processes by silencing women who might otherwise contribute meaningfully to political debate. The exclusion of women's voices results in less representative political discourse and perpetuates existing gender inequalities in leadership. When women choose not to participate in public life due to fear of digital harm, the legitimacy of political processes and the quality of democratic decision-making are compromised.

Gendered disinformation also has long-term implications for women's career trajectories. Women who were targeted with defamatory content reported difficulty regaining professional credibility, especially in fields where public image is crucial. Some women withdrew from leadership roles or declined public-facing opportunities due to fear of reputational damage.

Beyond political and professional impacts, gendered disinformation affects women's personal lives, often straining relationships and creating social isolation. Harmful rumours, once viral, can persist in communities even after being debunked, creating long-lasting stigma.

These multi-layered consequences highlight the urgent need for systemic interventions to protect women's rights, dignity, and safety in digital spaces.

6 | Legal and Policy Gaps

Tanzania has enacted several laws intended to regulate online behavior, including the Cybercrimes Act (2015), the Online Content Regulations (2020), the Media Services Act (2016), and the Personal Data Protection Act (2022). While these laws address issues such as cyberbullying, defamation, false information, and misuse of personal data, they do not specifically address gendered disinformation or recognize gender-targeted digital violence as a distinct harm.

The absence of gender-specific legal protections creates significant challenges for women seeking justice. Survivors of gendered disinformation often find it difficult to report incidents because current laws do not acknowledge the unique nature of gendered attacks. Law enforcement agencies lack clear guidelines for investigating or prosecuting digital gender-based violence, and the anonymity offered by digital platforms makes it difficult to identify perpetrators. As a result, many women do not pursue legal action, believing that it will be ineffective or will expose them to further harm.

Moreover, the current regulatory environment places significant responsibility on women to protect themselves rather than placing obligations on social media platforms or institutions to prevent harm. Without explicit legal provisions addressing gendered disinformation, social media companies operating in Tanzania are not compelled to develop Kiswahili-language moderation tools or invest in local safety mechanisms.

This legal ambiguity allows gendered disinformation to flourish, creating an environment where women are inadequately protected and perpetrators operate with impunity. Strengthening legal frameworks to recognize and address gender-targeted digital harm is therefore essential for improving the safety and dignity of women in digital spaces.

7 | Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, Zaina Foundation recommends a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach to address gendered disinformation in Tanzania. This approach should involve government institutions, social media platforms, civil society organizations, media, academia, and the general public.

A key priority is strengthening legal and policy frameworks so they explicitly recognize gendered digital violence. Existing laws should be reviewed and amended to incorporate definitions of gendered disinformation, outline appropriate penalties, and provide clear reporting and redress mechanisms for survivors.

Policymakers should also consider establishing specialized units within law enforcement agencies to handle digital gender-based violence cases with appropriate sensitivity.

Social media platforms must take greater responsibility for moderating harmful gendered content. This includes developing policies that recognize gendered disinformation as a form of online abuse, investing in Kiswahili-language moderation tools, and ensuring that harmful content is

swiftly removed. Platforms should also provide clear, accessible reporting mechanisms and offer guidance to users on how to protect themselves.

Building the digital resilience of women particularly those in public or leadership roles is another critical step. Training programs on digital safety, fact-checking, cybersecurity, and communication strategies can empower women to better protect themselves and respond to harmful narratives. Civil society organizations should partner with women leaders, journalists, and youth groups to develop capacity-building initiatives that address emerging digital threats. Public awareness is equally important. National campaigns aimed at improving digital literacy and encouraging responsible information sharing can help reduce the spread of harmful content.

Educators, journalists, and community leaders should collaborate to promote a culture of verification and critical thinking.

A coordinated national approach is needed to ensure consistent monitoring and response. Establishing a national fact-checking coalition composed of journalists, technologists, government agencies, and civil society organizations can help identify emerging disinformation trends, verify questionable content, and provide the public with reliable information. This coalition could also serve as a hub for reporting harmful narratives and advocating for accountability.

8 Conclusion

Gendered disinformation is a pervasive and deeply harmful phenomenon in Tanzania's digital ecosystem. It disproportionately targets women, undermines their participation in public life, and threatens the foundations of democratic discourse. The findings of this study, conducted during a politically sensitive period, highlight the urgent need for legal, social, and technological interventions to protect women's rights and strengthen democratic resilience.

Zaina Foundation submits this report to APC with gratitude for the support that made this research possible. We hope that the evidence and recommendations presented here will contribute to ongoing efforts to build safer, more inclusive, and more equitable digital spaces for women and girls in Tanzania. Addressing gendered disinformation is not only a matter of digital safety; it is essential for ensuring that women can participate fully and freely in shaping the future of our country.

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