



At the Intersection of Gender, Visibility, and Platform Dynamics: Unpacking Online Gender-Based Violence Across Sri Lanka's Electoral Cycle

Executive Summary¹

Online gender-based violence (OGBV) has become a defining obstacle to inclusive political participation worldwide. As political debate increasingly unfolds in digital spaces, online abuse shapes who feels able to speak, campaign, and remain visible in public life. For women – especially those seeking or holding elected office – the violence imposes disproportionate costs, silencing voices, discouraging candidacy, and reinforcing long-standing barriers to representation.²

These global dynamics manifest across many contexts, including Sri Lanka, where OGBV has emerged as one of the most significant forms of digital violence over the past five years.³ In this context, the persistence and strategic use of online violence against political actors not only threatens individuals' safety and participation, but also undermines the integrity, representativeness, and inclusiveness of democratic debate.⁴

- 1 Warning: This report contains references to, and screenshots of, gender-based violent content directed at political candidates and members of Parliament during the 2024 parliamentary electoral campaign and the subsequent year. This material is included solely for research and documentation purposes.
- 2 The German Society for International Cooperation, "[The influence of gender-based online violence on political and societal participation of women and girls](#)", 2022.
- 3 Fazeeha Azmi, "[Technology-Facilitated Violence Experienced by Women and Marginalized Groups in Sri Lanka](#)", UN Women, August 2025.
- 4 Hashtag Generations, "[Digital Challenges to Electoral Integrity](#)" [Social Media Monitoring Insights from Sri Lanka's 2024 Parliamentary Elections](#)".



This study examines how six highly visible candidates, now members of Parliament (MPs), were targeted by OGBV on Facebook and YouTube over the 12-month period from the October 2024 parliamentary campaign to October 2025. It analyses patterns of OGBV and how they evolved during this time, focusing on four women: Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, Savithri Paulraj, the minister of women and children's affairs, Rohini Kavirathna and Chamindranee Kiriella, both active opposition MPs, and two men – Vijitha Herath, the minister of foreign affairs, foreign employment and tourism, and Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the opposition. Additionally, the study explores how variables such as gender, visibility, and platform dynamics shaped political OGBV discourse in Sri Lanka.

Key findings:

- Overall, our analysis of 110,289 YouTube and Facebook comments identified 7,082 (6.4 per cent) containing instances of OGBV directed at the selected candidates and current MPs. When examining OGBV in more detail, we were able to classify 1,120 (15.8 per cent) of all OGBV comments into pre-defined categories, namely hate speech, sexual harassment, or violent threats. The remaining 5,962 OGBV comments (84.2 per cent) did not fall into any of these sub-categories. This study includes a brief qualitative review of the 1,120 cases classified.
- Consistent with previous studies, women candidates and current MPs experienced higher levels of OGBV than their men counterparts: 7.9 per cent of comments on Facebook and YouTube posts mentioning women contained OGBV, compared with 4.2 per cent of comments referring to men.
- Across the platforms, YouTube emerged as the one where OGBV was most common, with 7.2 per cent of comments on YouTube videos in our sample containing this content, compared with 5.6 per cent of comments on Facebook posts. We elaborate on these figures further in the report.



- Looking beyond gender and platform, candidates' visibility also shaped exposure to OGBV. For women, higher public visibility consistently translated into higher levels of abuse. Prime Minister Amarasuriya faced the highest proportion, with 8.8 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her containing OGBV, with figures of 7.8 per cent and 6.8 per cent, respectively, for MP Kiriella and Paulraj, the government minister. While high-level engagement of all kinds can be expected for the prime minister, we hypothesise and elaborate further in the report that the high prevalence of OGBV towards her was strongly driven by the gender dimension.
- OGBV also targeted men candidates and current MPs, although at lower levels: 4.3 per cent of comments on posts mentioning Premadasa contained OGBV, while the figure was 4.1 per cent for Herath. **Notably, compared with the women candidates, the relationship between visibility and exposure to OGBV was weaker for men.**
- According to the definition adopted in this report, OGBV can take multiple forms, including doxing, impersonation, hate speech, violent threats, and sexual harassment. In total, we identified 7,082 comments containing OGBV, which were then further classified. Our methodology reliably labelled 1,120 observations (15.8 per cent), while the remaining 5,962 instances of OGBV did not fall directly into our categories of interest.
- Among the classified comments, hate speech appeared in 10.7 per cent of all OGBV comments (760 observations), sexual harassment accounted for 4.3 per cent (304 comments), and violent threats were present in 0.8 per cent of comments containing instances of OGBV (56 observations).

The findings indicate that OGBV remains a persistent feature of online political debate in Sri Lanka, affecting both men and women candidates. Exposure to OGBV seems to be shaped by several factors, including gender, visibility, and platform dynamics. Notably, visibility operates unevenly across genders; greater public exposure consistently increases the risk of OGBV for women candidates, while its effect on men remains comparatively limited.



In response to these patterns, we developed a set of recommendations for the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, social media platforms, and civil society, each set tailored to their respective roles in safeguarding the online information environment. To that end, we recommend stronger platform responses, the enforcement of national guidelines, and more robust cooperation between social media companies, electoral authorities, and civil society actors, particularly in contexts like Sri Lanka, where formal mechanisms for reporting harmful content and ensuring platform accountability are limited. Failing to close these gaps risks further undermining electoral integrity and hindering meaningful democratic participation.

Introduction

OGBV is a well-documented and enduring impediment to inclusive political participation across diverse contexts, suppressing women's political voices, constraining pathways to candidacy, and systematically eroding the quality and representativeness of democratic institutions. From Brazil⁵ to Jordan, and from Lebanon and Tunisia⁶ to Poland⁷ and Spain,⁸ online spaces have not only opened new avenues for conversations, but also vectors for OGBV, and at a disproportionate rate targeting women.⁹

Sri Lanka is no exception. The 2024 parliamentary elections appeared to mark a turning point, coming on the heels of the 2022 Aragalaya protest

⁵ DRI, "[Gender-Based Violence on X and YouTube in the São Paulo Mayoral Election](#)", 16 October 2024.

⁶ DRI, "[New Paper: Online Gender-Based Violence in the MENA Region](#)", 24 January 2024.

⁷ DRI, "[From Hashtags to Votes: Social Media Patterns in Poland's 2023 Parliamentary Elections](#)", 15 December 2023.

⁸ "[From Hashtags to Votes: Social Media Patterns in Spain's 2023 Parliamentary Elections](#)", 13 September 2023.

⁹ Ingrid Beck, Florencia Alcaraz & Paula Rodriguez, "[Online gender-based violence against women with a public voice. Impact on freedom of expression](#)," UN Women, 2022.



movement, and resulting in the election of 21 women (9.4 per cent of the seats in the legislature), the highest number in the country's parliamentary history.¹⁰ What looked like a moment of political renewal and expanded representation, however, also brought new forms of scrutiny. **While increased visibility inevitably exposes candidates to a degree of public criticism, the patterns observed in this election suggest that visibility alone cannot account for the forms of hostility directed at women.** Evidence from Groundviews points to a sharp rise in explicitly gendered and misogynistic attacks since 2024, both offline and across digital platforms,¹¹ suggesting that the apparent gains in representation were accompanied by a significant backlash, rather than universal acceptance. Moreover, previous research by DRI and Factum has shown that women politicians continued to face disproportionate levels of online hate speech during the 2025 local government election campaign.¹²

Within this context, this report focuses on the 2024 parliamentary election campaign (October 2024) and follows developments up to October 2025, for a total of 12 months after the new parliament was elected. It analyses the extent to which six candidates – those who obtained the highest vote shares in their respective districts and who are now high-visibility MPs – **were targeted by OGBV on Facebook and YouTube, and how this evolved during the first year of the new government.** Specifically, it examines patterns of OGBV directed at four women: Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, Savithri Paulraj, the minister of women and children's affairs, and Rohini Kavirathna and Chamindranee Kiriella (both active opposition MPs), as well as two men, Vijitha Herath, the minister of foreign affairs, foreign employment and tourism, and Sajith Premadasa, the leader of the opposition. Additionally,

¹⁰ Newswire, "[Record number of women elected to Sri Lankan Parliament in 2024](#)", 16 November 2024.

¹¹ Shreen Abdul Saroor & Nebeela Iqbal, "[From Parliament to Platforms: How Sri Lanka's Women Leaders Face Digital Violence](#)", *Groundviews*, 9 September 2025.

¹² Camila Weinmann, Ognjan Denkowski & Prihesh Ratnayake, "[When Politics Turns Personal: Hate Speech and Online Gender Based-Violence in Sri Lanka's 2025 Local Elections](#)", DRI, 23 November 2025.



it explores the forms OGBV has taken across these platforms, such as hate speech, sexual harassment, and violent threats.

To ground the analysis, we draw on the UN definition of OGBV: “Any form of violence that is enabled by or perpetrated by using technology or a digital interface, in particular the internet or smart devices. Also referred to as technology-facilitated gender-based violence. It can target one’s gender, sex, or sexual orientation”. According to the UN, OGBV can take multiple forms, including hate speech, violent threats, and sexual harassment.¹³

The relevance of this study is further underscored by the fact that OGBV poses systemic risks to the integrity of democracy, particularly in light of Sri Lanka’s legal framework. According to the media guidelines issued by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka, the promotion of violence on social media is prohibited.¹⁴ In addition, the Commission’s Code of Conduct for contesting political parties, independent groups, and candidates in the parliamentary election¹⁵ emphasises the need to abstain from any form of hate speech, especially that targeting women, and to avoid making statements or engaging in actions that are contemptuous or abusive towards women on the basis of their physical appearance. Lastly, manifestations of OGBV breach platforms’ own terms of use, which ban violence and harassment online.¹⁶

13 UN Women, “[Toolkit: Youth Guide to End Online Gender-Based Violence. Second Edition](#)”, 2024.

14 “[Media Guidelines under Article 104b\(5\)\(A\) of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka](#)”, The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, 3 March 2025.

15 The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, “[Code of Conduct Issued in Pursuance of Section 8\(8\) of the Parliamentary Elections Act, No.1 of 1981, as amended by the Parliamentary Elections \(Amendment\) Act, No. 58 of 2009](#)”, 25 September 2024.

16 Meta, “[Community Standards](#)”; You Tube Help, “[YouTube’s Community Guidelines](#)”.



Main Findings

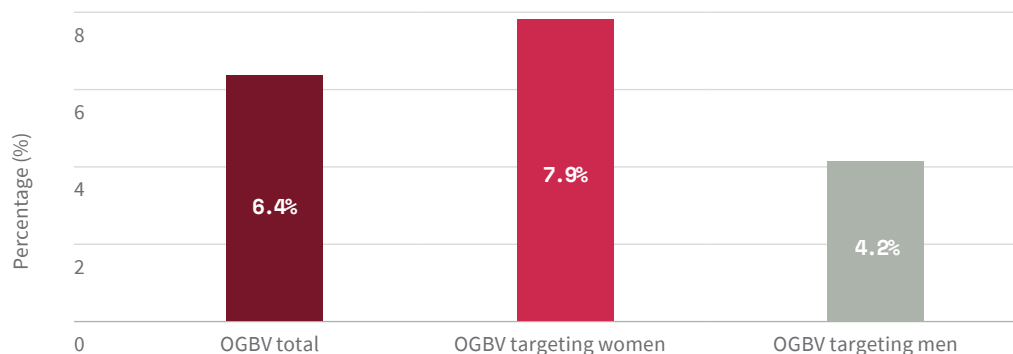
Our analysis is structured in two sections. First, with a focus on user comments, we analysed the exposure of OGBV by gender, platform, and candidate. We explored whether, and in what ways, exposure to OGBV has evolved during the first year of the government. Second, we examined forms of OGBV, looking specifically at hate speech, sexual harassment, and violent threats directed at the candidates and current MPs.

Exposure to OGBV

Out of a total of 110,289 YouTube and Facebook comments analysed, 7,082 (6.4 per cent) of our sample contained instances of OGBV directed at the selected candidates. Further, we examined the specific forms of OGBV present in the dataset. With our methodology, we were able to classify 1,120 of all OGBV comments (15.8 per cent) into the sub-categories of hate speech, sexual harassment, or violent threats. The remaining 5,962 OGBV comments (84.2 per cent) did not fall into any of these sub-categories.

In line with our previous studies, women candidates were targeted more frequently than their men counterparts; overall, 7.9 per cent of comments on Facebook and YouTube posts mentioning women candidates contained instances of OGBV, compared with 4.2 per cent of comments referring to men.

Figure 1: Distribution of OGBV (comments by gender)





Our data shows that OGBV was more prevalent on YouTube, with 7.2 per cent of comments in our sample containing OGBV, than on Facebook, where this figure was 5.6 per cent. This difference may be partly explained by how users engage with each platform in Sri Lanka, as users spend more time on YouTube, even though Facebook remains the more widely used platform.¹⁷ At the same time, it may also reflect a platform-governance issue, given that content moderation on YouTube has proven less effective.¹⁸

While the aggregate patterns above provide a useful overview, they can conceal important differences in how individual candidates are targeted. We therefore examine how OGBV is distributed across the six candidates to assess differences in exposure and the contextual factors that may explain them. Exclusively, among women candidates and current MPs, a consistent pattern emerged – **greater visibility coincided with higher levels of OGBV**. Prime Minister Amarasuriya, by far the most visible women in national politics during the period of analysis, was the most heavily targeted, with 8.8 per cent of comments on posts mentioning her containing OGBV. While part of this exposure is likely linked to her de facto higher public visibility relative to other figures in our sample, we also hypothesise that a significant share of OGBV directed at her has a gender-based component, and that a man prime minister would likely face lower levels of such abuse, though this is not something we can validate with the current dataset. Kavirathna experienced the second highest level of OGBV comments, at 7.8 per cent. Kiriella and Paulraj, the first Tamil woman MP elected from the Matara District, were subjected to violent comments in 6.8 per cent and 6.2 per cent of comments on posts mentioning them, respectively. The findings show that women political actors with higher public visibility experienced greater exposure to OGBV.

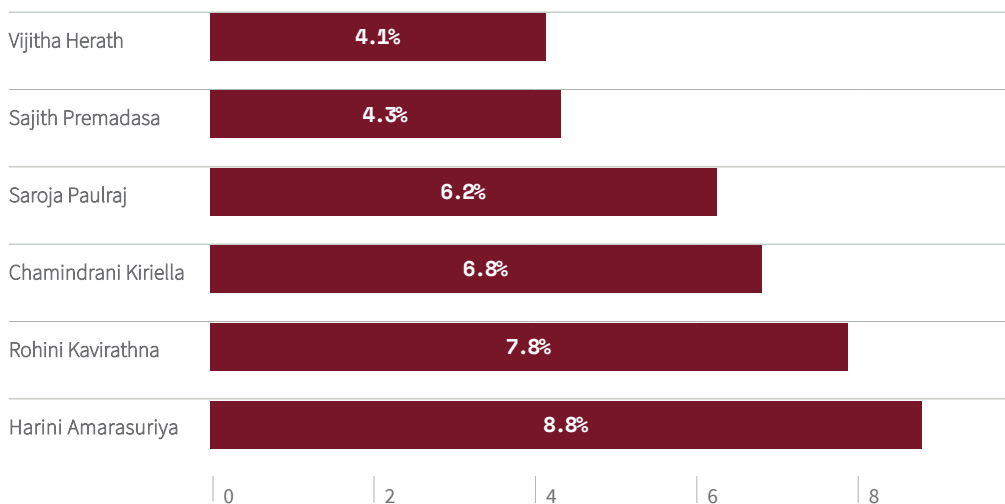
¹⁷ “Statcounter GlobalStats, “[Social Media Stats Sri Lanka](#).”

¹⁸ Responsiveness of Social Media Platforms, Yearly Report 2022/23, Hashtag Generation



By contrast, and consistent with previous studies, OGBV directed at men candidates and current MPs was notably lower, at 4.3 per cent and 4.1 per cent, respectively, for Premadasa and Herath. Together, these patterns show that visibility does not function as a neutral factor; it increases women's exposure to OGBV, while its effect on men remains comparatively limited.

Figure 2: Distribution of OGBV comments by candidate



This dynamic can also be seen in our temporal analyses. Figure 3 shows that exposure to OGBV stayed consistently higher for women candidates and current MPs than for their men counterparts, and that spikes in OGBV for women aligned with periods of heightened media attention, whereas this effect was significantly less pronounced for men candidates.



Figure 3: Distribution of OGBV comments by gender between October 2024 and October 2025

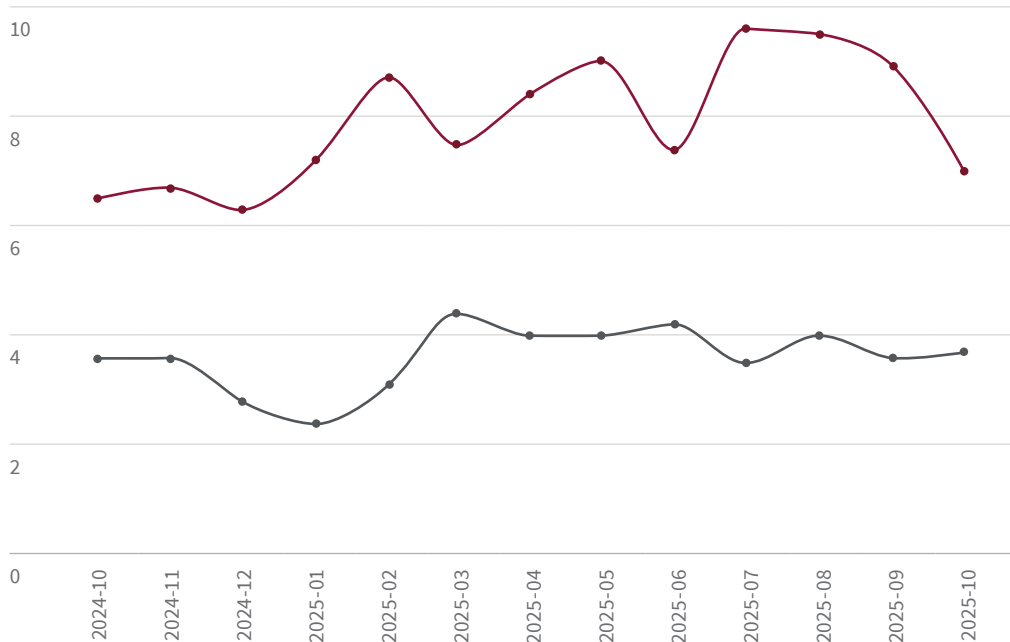


Figure 4 illustrates that Prime Minister Amarasuriya was targeted throughout the year, often through gendered narratives attacking her sexual orientation and marital status.¹⁹ Kavirathna faced surges in February and March, following statements by Deputy Minister Nalin Hewage, accusing Kaviranthna’s father of involvement in killings during unrest in 1988 and 1989, and again in July 2025, after her exchange with the speaker of the Parliament, where she asked a question on environmental pollution and traffic congestion. Our data shows similar patterns for Paulraj, who experienced intensified OGBV in May 2025, following her remark that parents

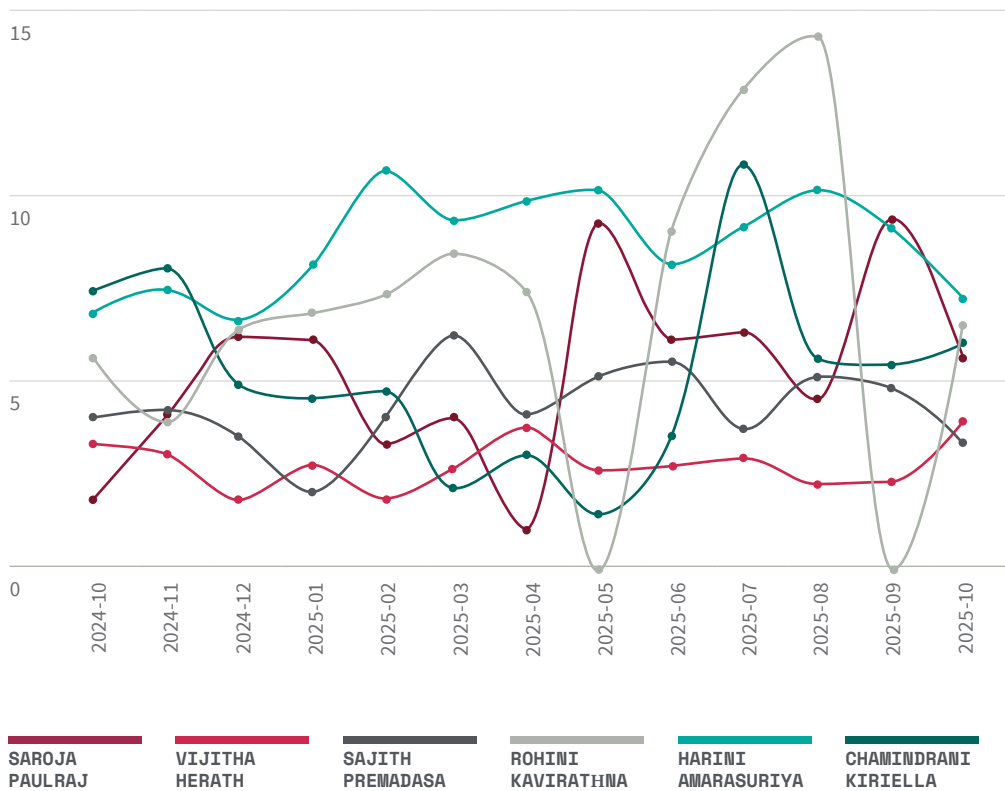
¹⁹ Camila Weinmann, Ognjan Denkowski & Prihesh Ratnayake, "When Politics Turns Personal: Hate Speech and Online Gender Based-Violence in Sri Lanka’s 2025 Local Elections", *op. cit.*, note 12.



of a student who committed suicide after allegedly having been sexually abused should file a formal complaint, a response widely viewed as insensitive by the public. Lastly, Kiriella was targeted in July 2025, after accusations concerning the misuse of government-owned land.

In contrast, exposure to OGBV among men candidates remained relatively stable throughout the year. The only notable peaks appeared between March and May 2025, when online violent content increased for both Premadasa and Herath, likely reflecting their heightened presence in social media during the local government elections.

Figure 4: Distribution of OGBV comments by candidate between October 2024 and October 2025





Taken together, the analyses show that exposure to OGBV is shaped by a combination of intersecting variables that go beyond gender alone. While gender appears to remain a central factor – women candidates and MPs included in this study were consistently targeted at higher levels than their men counterparts – visibility also played a decisive role for the prime minister and women MPs and candidates. For women in politics, increased public exposure consistently heightened the level of OGBV they experienced on both platforms, whereas for men, comparably high levels of visibility did not translate into comparable spikes in abuse. Platform characteristics further reinforce these disparities. Facebook, the most widely used platform in Sri Lanka, generated large volumes of abusive content, but our YouTube data contained a higher concentration of OGBV, likely due to differences in user behaviour and comparatively weaker content moderation. Overall, these dynamics suggest that OGBV occurs at the intersection among gendered biases, political visibility, and platform-specific conditions, with visibility itself operating asymmetrically across genders.

OGBV Forms Identified in Our Analysis

OGBV can take multiple forms on social media, including doxing, impersonation, hate speech, violent threats, and sexual harassment. In this study, we classified the 7,082 comments containing instances of OGBV to identify which specific forms appeared in our sample. Our methodology was able to reliably capture three sub-forms – hate speech (760 observations), violent threats (56 observations), and sexual harassment (304 observations), which are examined in greater detail below. We observed 5,962 further instances of OGBV that did not fall into the categories of interest in this study.



The following definitions guided our coding and analysis of these forms of OGBV:

- **Hate speech:** Hurtful, harmful, hateful, and insulting statements, comments, or other forms of expression that target a person for their sex, gender, or sexual orientation, including comments suggesting that the person targeted deserves to face harm or should harm themselves.²⁰
- **Violent threats:** Direct and indirect threats of violence, such as physical or sexual threats, which can sometimes quickly spill over into the offline world.²¹
- **Sexual harassment:** Unwanted sexualised behaviour, including messaging, emailing, or direct messaging across different social media platforms and the internet. This can involve bullying and sexualised content, such as sexual insults, comments about a person's body, degrading sexualised language, and sexual threats, among other such comments.²²

Figure 5 shows clear differences in how these three forms of OGBV manifested across our sample. Hate speech appeared in 10.7 per cent of all OGBV comments, while sexual harassment accounted for 4.3 per cent of the OGBV-related content, encompassing sexual insults, sexualised language, and sexual threats. Violent threats made up 0.8 per cent of OGBV comments, including direct or indirect threats of violence against candidates. Below, we provide qualitative case examples illustrating these three OGBV sub-forms.

²⁰ UN Women, "[Toolkit: Youth Guide to End Online Gender-Based Violence. Second Edition](#)", *op. cit.*, note 13.

²¹ Amnesty International, "[Online Violence](#)".

²² UN Women, "[Toolkit: Youth Guide to End Online Gender-Based Violence. Second Edition](#)", *op. cit.*, note 13.



Figure 5: Distribution of identified sub-forms of OGBV

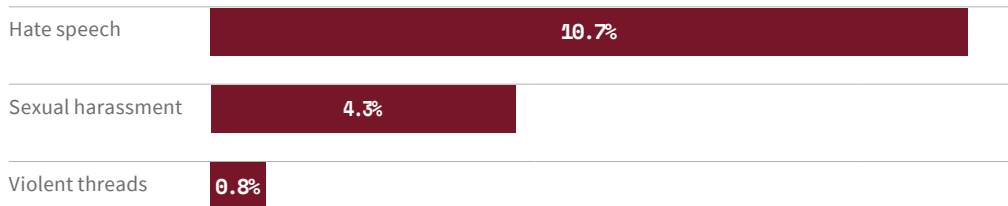
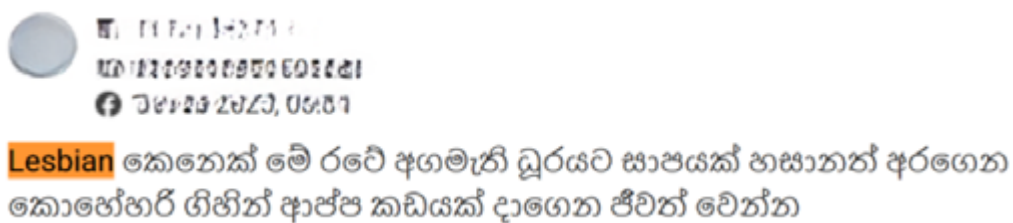


Image 1 shows a Facebook comment directed at Prime Minister Amarasuriya that combines multiple forms of hate speech; It describes her as a “curse” to the country, claiming she is a lesbian, and uses derogatory language, such as *hopper*, against both her and her personal assistant. While *hopper* is a traditional Sri Lankan dish, in this context, it is used as a local slur targeting lesbian women.

Image 1: A Facebook comment using homophobic hate speech in reference to Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya.



Above: “It is a curse to have a lesbian as the prime minister in this country. Please take Hasana and go open a hopper shop somewhere else”.

Our second example shows a YouTube comment using harmful language against candidate and government minister Paulraj, attacking her on the basis of her gender and identity.



Image 2: A YouTube comment using both ethnic and sexualised hate speech against government minister Saroja Paulraj.



2 months ago

Pala demala hutti puka danna netuwa

[Translate to English](#)

Above: “Go away without offering your ass, you Tamil wh*re.”

Lastly, image 3 shows a YouTube comment that contained a violent threat calling for the candidate and current government minister Paulraj to be killed.

Image 3: A YouTube comment containing a violent threat directed at government minister Saroja Paulraj



2 months ago

munwa kudu goniwala bassala marand oone'

[Translate to English](#)

Above: “These people should be stuffed into sacks and killed”



Addressing Online Gender-Based Violence in Electoral Contexts: Policy Recommendations for Regulators, Platforms, and Civil Society

Our findings show that OGBV was a persistent feature of online political debate during the 2024-2025 electoral cycle in Sri Lanka, affecting both women and men candidates and current functionaries. Patterns of exposure were shaped by multiple, overlapping factors: gender, with women consistently facing higher overall levels of abuse; visibility, which amplified the vulnerability of high-profile women, most notably Prime Minister Amarasuriya, while not producing comparable increases for men; and platform dynamics, with YouTube displaying higher concentrations of abuse due to user behaviour and weaker moderation. Lastly, our data reveals that hostility also manifested differently across forms of OGBV.

The patterns identified in this report underline critical gaps in platform accountability and the enforcement of electoral safeguards. While Facebook and YouTube remain central spaces for political communication in Sri Lanka, the persistence of OGBV directed at both women and men politicians, but disproportionately at high-visibility women leaders, demonstrates that existing regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms are insufficient to prevent or mitigate OGBV during election periods.

Strengthening coordination between social media platforms, the Election Commission, and civil society will be essential to ensuring that candidates can participate in the digital public sphere without facing targeted gender-based harm. This is particularly urgent in contexts where online abuse can undermine democratic participation, distort public debate, and discourage political engagement, especially among women.



In response to these findings, we make the following recommendations:

To The Election Commission of Sri Lanka:

- Enforce existing regulations through concrete actions, such as requesting platform cooperation or issuing takedown requests during election periods;
- Develop comprehensive guidelines for addressing OGBV in political contexts through a participatory, consultative process involving independent experts, civil society organisations, women politicians, academics, and digital-rights advocates, to ensure both effectiveness and legitimacy;
- Introduce targeted training programmes and capacity-building opportunities, including for, but not limited to, women politicians and candidates, covering digital security, psychological resilience and coping strategies for OGBV, effective response mechanisms to online attacks, available legal remedies, and media literacy and strategic online communication, among others; and
- Establish a multi-stakeholder coordination platform that brings together representatives of the Election Commission, election monitoring organisations, social media platforms, traditional and digital media, civil society groups, and women's rights advocates, to share data, coordinate responses, develop joint strategies, and ensure rapid action during election periods.

To Social Media Platforms:

- Significantly strengthen content-moderation practices, to ensure the effective detection and removal of OGBV by investing in Sinhala-, Tamil-, and English-language expertise, as well as context-specific cultural competency; and



- Designate platform liaison officers to work directly with the Election Commission and accredited monitoring organisations, ensuring rapid communication during election periods, coordinated protocols for handling OGBV incidents, and limited data sharing to identify trends.

To Civil Society Organisations:

- Integrate OGBV monitoring as a core component of election observation methodologies, and conduct evidence-based research to inform policy development and to ensure that advocacy efforts are grounded in solid empirical evidence;
- Launch public awareness campaigns aimed at educating citizens about OGBV and its harmful effects on democracy, targeting specific audiences, including young voters, party supporters, and social media influencers, who can shape online political culture, recognising that changing norms requires effort and a multi-stakeholder approach; and
- Provide training programmes for women politicians, developed jointly with the Election Commission, covering OGBV recognition and documentation, coping and resilience strategies, reporting and legal pathways, strategic communications, and digital security.

Methodology

Our dataset comprised 155,254 observations, including 96,742 from Facebook (posts and associated comments) and 58,512 from YouTube (videos and associated comments), covering the period between 15 October 2024 and 15 October 2025.



Table 2: Sample distribution across social media platforms

	Facebook	YouTube
Posts/videos	4,1925	3,040
Associated comments	5,4817	55,472
Total	9,6742	58,512

The sample consisted mostly of content from political parties, candidates, politicians, media outlets, political analysts, and influencers that directly referenced the six candidates that received the greatest number of preferential votes during the 2024 elections, along with the comments associated with this content. Given that violent content is most commonly present in user comments, however, we restricted this study to comments, resulting in a dataset of 110,289 observations. The period covered in the sample coincides with the official start of the 2024 electoral campaign, on 15 October 2024, and the subsequent 12 months, up to 15 October 2025. Examining this period allowed us to capture emerging patterns of OGBV in the lead-up to the elections, and their evolution during the first year of the new government.

Data collection was carried out using a combination of tools. To identify and retrieve YouTube videos and comments, we relied on the YouTube API. To collect Facebook posts, we used the Meta Content Library, and complemented this with additional tools to retrieve comments from the pre-identified posts. The comments collected and analysed came from the 15 most-commented posts per month referring to each politician. This approach ensured proportional data representation across the entire year.

To identify OGBV comments, we relied on an existing dataset that had already been manually labelled for such content. These examples were used to train a machine-learning model capable of identifying similar abusive content in a larger dataset. To improve how well the model identified content in local languages, it was pre-trained with a tokeniser designed specifically for these, which allowed us to more effectively capture the linguistic patterns of how users communicate on social media. The final model



achieved an overall accuracy of 82 per cent and a precision of 80 per cent, meaning it was able to identify most abusive content, with relatively few false positives (see appendix for further details on the OGBV identification methodology in local languages).

We developed lexicons to identify sub-categories of OGBV (see appendix). As no labelled datasets exist in local languages for these forms, a lexicon-based approach was chosen as the most suitable option for this project, despite its widely acknowledged limitations. Using this method, 15.8 per cent of all OGBV comments (1,120 observations) were classified as hate speech, sexual harassment, or violent threats. The remaining 84.2 per cent (5,962 OGBV comments) did not fall into any of these sub-categories.

Limitations

The findings of this study should be interpreted in light of several limitations.

First, because the analysis relies on retrospective data collection, some online content may have been deleted, restricted, or altered by users or platforms before retrieval. This may have limited our ability to capture the full extent of OGBV during the period under analysis.

Second, as our data comes only from Facebook and YouTube, these patterns might not be consistent with those on other platforms with different user dynamics and moderation practices.

Third, and as mentioned previously, the classification of OGBV forms was constrained by the absence of labelled datasets in Sinhala and Tamil. As a result, sub-categories could only be identified through a lexicon-based approach, which captured 1,120 comments containing specific linguistic markers, but could not capture all relevant instances. This limited the granularity of the OGBV sub-form analysis, and resulted in 5,962 OGBV comments remaining unclassified at the sub-form level. While we consider the lexicon a viable solution for this project, the limitations associated with this approach are well established, although we believe that our rate



of false positives is below marginal, which instills confidence in our reported results. Last, while the study documented the prevalence and forms of OGBV, it does not assess the psychological, social, or political effects on individual candidates, nor the implications for campaign dynamics or electoral outcomes. Assessing these impacts would require complementary qualitative approaches, such as interviews, surveys, or ethnographic work, which fall outside the scope of this analysis.

Despite these limitations, we believe that the study contributes valuable evidence for ongoing efforts to understand and address OGBV in online political debate in Sri Lanka.

Appendix. Lexicon of OGBV-related terms

Hate speech	Sexual harassment	Violent threats
w*ore (Sinhala: w*sa)	Ass (Tamil: soothu)	Kill (Sinhala: maranawa; Tamil: koll)
c*nt (Sinhala: hu**i)	Fu*k (Sinhala: hu**na)	Hit/attack (Sinhala: gahapiya)
fa**ot (Sinhala: po**aya)	Prostitute/sex worker (Sinhala: badu)	

Methodology for OGBV Identification in Local Languages

This methodology was applied to identify comments containing OGBV in Sinhala and Tamil-language online discourse.

Rationale for Machine Learning Approach

We opted for a trained machine learning model rather than a lexicon-based approach due to the linguistic complexity of Sinhala and Tamil and the



characteristics of user-generated online content. Unlike keyword-based methods that rely on fixed terms, a supervised machine learning model learns patterns from annotated data, enabling it to detect implicit and evolving forms of OGBV that static approaches systematically miss.

In this context, lexicon-based approaches proved insufficient and limited for three main reasons. First, user-generated content showed a high degree of variability in spelling, phrasing, and informal language use. Second, comments frequently involved code-switching, mixing English characters with local phonetic spellings (commonly referred to as Singlish and Tanglish). Third, abusive content often relies on subtle or evasive language designed to bypass standard content moderation filters, which static keyword lists failed to capture.

Together, these characteristics limit the effectiveness of static keyword lists, which cannot adapt to linguistic variation, mixed scripts, or context-dependent expressions of abuse. In contrast, our final machine learning model achieved a precision of 82 per cent and an overall accuracy of 80 per cent in detecting OGBV.

Dataset Composition

The model was trained on a manually annotated dataset of over 14,500 comments. We ensured a balanced binary class distribution (OGBV vs. non-OGBV), with approximately 47 per cent of the dataset consisting of OGBV content, reducing the risk of imbalances and improving model's ability to distinguish abusive from non-abuse content during training.

Model Selection and Experimentation

We evaluated multiple model architectures to determine the most suitable approach for the classification task. We tested transformer-based models, including Sinhala-BERT and Llama 3.1 but were ultimately discarded, as they produced suboptimal results and showed limited effectiveness when fine-tuned for binary classification in this specific context. Our analysis therefore



shifted toward traditional machine learning classifiers. Among these, XGBoost and Linear Support Vector Classification (LinearSVC) demonstrated stronger performance and better adaptability to the dataset. We selected XGBoost as the final model, based on its superior overall results.

Technical Implementation & Optimisation

We applied several optimisation strategies to enhance model performance. We used a custom tokenizer, pre-trained on a large corpus of local-language text, to better capture vernacular expressions and linguistic nuances. Feature extraction relied on an n-gram range of 1 to 5, allowing the model to analyse not only individual words but also short phrases and contextual patterns associated with abusive speech, and significantly improving its detection. Additionally, we conducted hyperparameter tuning for both models, XGBoost and LinearSVC, with the first one consistently outperforming alternatives. The training process prioritised precision over overall accuracy to minimise false positives, reducing the risk of incorrectly flagging non-abusive comments, an important consideration for interpretability and trust in the results.

Final Evaluation

Following the training, we validated model outputs through a manual review of potential false positives. The final optimised XGBoost model achieved a precision of 82 per cent and an overall accuracy of 80 per cent.

Overall, our approach provided a context-sensitive and robust mechanism for identifying OGBV, addressing key limitations of lexicon-based methods in multilingual and informal online environments.



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About Democracy Reporting International

DRI is an independent organisation dedicated to promoting democracy worldwide. We believe that people are active participants in public life, not subjects of their governments. Our work centres on analysis, reporting, and capacity-building. For this, we are guided by the democratic and human rights obligations enshrined in international law.

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