

ADDRESSING ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN LOCAL POLITICS

A Toolbox for Zimbabwe



Preface

Violence against women in politics poses a significant threat to democracy and women's full political participation. Online violence has emerged as the most prevalent form of violence experienced by women active in politics. Digital platforms such as Facebook, X and WhatsApp are increasingly being used to harass, intimidate, threaten and silence women in politics. In extreme cases online threats escalate into physical attacks and assault against women politicians. This violence creates a political environment dominated by fear and hostility and can ultimately force women to withdraw from political processes.

Advancements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools allow perpetrators to launch coordinated attacks, generate fake images and spread disinformation at a fast rate. The use of anonymous accounts makes it difficult to identify perpetrators and detect the source of attacks. Most importantly, many countries do not have effective laws and regulations to prevent online abuse or to prosecute perpetrators. Many women find themselves exposed to high levels of online violence and do not have access to the necessary information on how to protect themselves or how to access justice and support after an attack.

This toolbox draws on data that was collected from six local government authorities in Zimbabwe on online violence against women in local politics. It provides recommendations and strategies for women in politics and local government authorities on how to address online violence. These recommendations fall under three pillars: Protection, Mitigation, Prosecution (PMP). The strategies suggested in this toolbox can be adapted and applied to other local and regional contexts to address escalating online violence against women in politics.

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Introduction

In 2025, the #16DaysOfActivism global campaign was held under the theme “UNiTE to End Digital Violence against All Women and Girls”. The United Nations (UN) asserts that digital violence has become the fastest-growing threat against the safety of women and girls in this decade. In his speech to commence the campaign the UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that, “violence against women and girls is a global scourge, and in our digital age, it is being amplified by the reach and speed of technology.” He further noted that women are being subjected to online harassment, deepfake images, hate speech and misogynistic content is increasingly moving from the “margins to the mainstream.” He ended his address with a plea to all, “we cannot allow digital spaces to be yet another place where women and girls are unsafe” (UN, 2025). The global campaign sought to not only highlight the prevalence of digital violence against women, but it also aimed to create a momentum towards collective responses to this global threat.

Research shows that specific groups of women and girls are more vulnerable to digital violence and online abuse than others. Institutions that monitor global democracy have noted an exponential increase in the use of digital platforms to attack, threaten, harass and silence politically active women. While these platforms serve as avenues for increased communication, advocacy and information sharing, they have become increasingly hostile spaces for women in politics. Women active in politics have emerged as one of the key groups targeted with online harassment and hate speech triggered by their public profiles and hyper-visibility. A 2021 study conducted by the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU) on sexism and harassment against women parliamentarians in Africa interviewed 137 female parliamentarians from 50 countries. Of the women interviewed, 42% reported receiving threats of death, rape, beating, or abduction, primarily through social media (IPU, 2021). A more recent IPU report on 150 women parliamentarians from 33 countries in the Asia Pacific region found that 60% were subjected to online hate speech, disinformation campaigns, image-based abuse, and disclosure of personal information that compromised their physical safety (IPU, 2025). According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) online violence against women in politics is the most prevalent form of violence faced by women in politics today and it poses a deepening threat to democracy and the integrity of representative politics (NDI, 2024).

This toolbox provides guidance on how to address online violence against women in local politics, with a specific focus on Zimbabwe. It draws from research funded by the ICLD that was conducted in Zimbabwe with elected and unelected local government officials and civil society organisations. Zimbabwe is the only democratic country in Southern Africa categorised as ‘not free’ by Freedom House (Freedom House, 2026).¹ Even though the country employs a

¹ Eswatini is also classified as ‘Not Free’ by Freedom House. Eswatini is not a democratic state, it is an absolute monarchy with limited constitutional provisions.

legal gender quota for parliament and local government seats, it has recorded a slow decline in women's representation in the last two election cycles (Mtero et al., 2023). Studies conducted after the 2023 elections revealed an increase in online attacks aimed at both elected and aspiring women politicians. These conditions create an environment of hostility and discourage women from fully participating in political activities. Work on barriers to women's political participation and violence against women in politics in Zimbabwe has primarily focused on women in national politics, neglecting the experiences of women at the local government level. As such, this toolbox focuses on women in local government politics and offers strategies and recommendations for protection, mitigation and prosecution of online violence. The toolbox provides recommendations for women in politics, local government authorities and legislators. Some recommendations may also be of relevance to civil society organisations that support gender equality, women's political participation and good governance. While this toolbox applies to Zimbabwe, the recommendations can be adapted and applied to other local and regional contexts to address escalating online violence against women in politics.

Key concepts: What is online violence against women in politics?

Online violence against women in politics is defined as any act of harassment, abuse or harm directed at a women active in politics using digital tools or transmitted on a digital platform. These attacks are targeted at the women primarily because of their gender and is considered a sub-category of gender-based violence.

Online violence against women in politics falls under the umbrella of the broader concept of **Violence Against Women in Politics (VAWIP)**, which is defined as **all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation designed to exclude women from politics solely due to their gender** (Krook, 2017). Researchers argue that VAWIP is different from 'general political violence' as it is a specific "phenomenon involving a range of harms to attack and undermine women as political actors (...) and exclude them as a group from public life" (Krook, 2020). Another definition describes VAWIP **as all acts or threats of violence resulting in physical, psychological, or symbolic harm or suffering to women involved in, or associated with, politics** (Kuperberg, 2018). This definition extends beyond physical attacks, recognising that harm is not always physical and can manifest in complex ways. It is important to note that this violence targets different categories of politically active women, including elected officials, officeholders, candidates, aspiring politicians, activists, and their supporters, families, communities and staff.

Research shows that VAWIP has four main aims: to prevent women from participating freely in politics, to limit the political agency of women leaders, to create an unsafe political environment for women politicians and to reduce the pool of women willing to compete in elections. Ultimately this violence results in an overall decline in women's political participation, women's representation and substantive democracy (Bardall, 2011 ; Bardall et al., 2020 ; Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2023).

VAWIP falls into five main categories: **physical, economic, sexual, psychological and semiotic violence**. Online violence has emerged as the most prevalent form of violence faced by women in politics. Conceptually it can be categorised as semiotic violence, that intersects with psychological, sexual, economic and physical violence. Semiotic violence refers to the use of semiotic resources, such as words, body language and images to injure, discipline, and subjugate women (Krook, 2022). A common example of this form of violence is the sharing of AI generated sexual images of high-profile women to humiliate and tarnish their political reputation.

Figure 1 provides a range of acts of online violence:

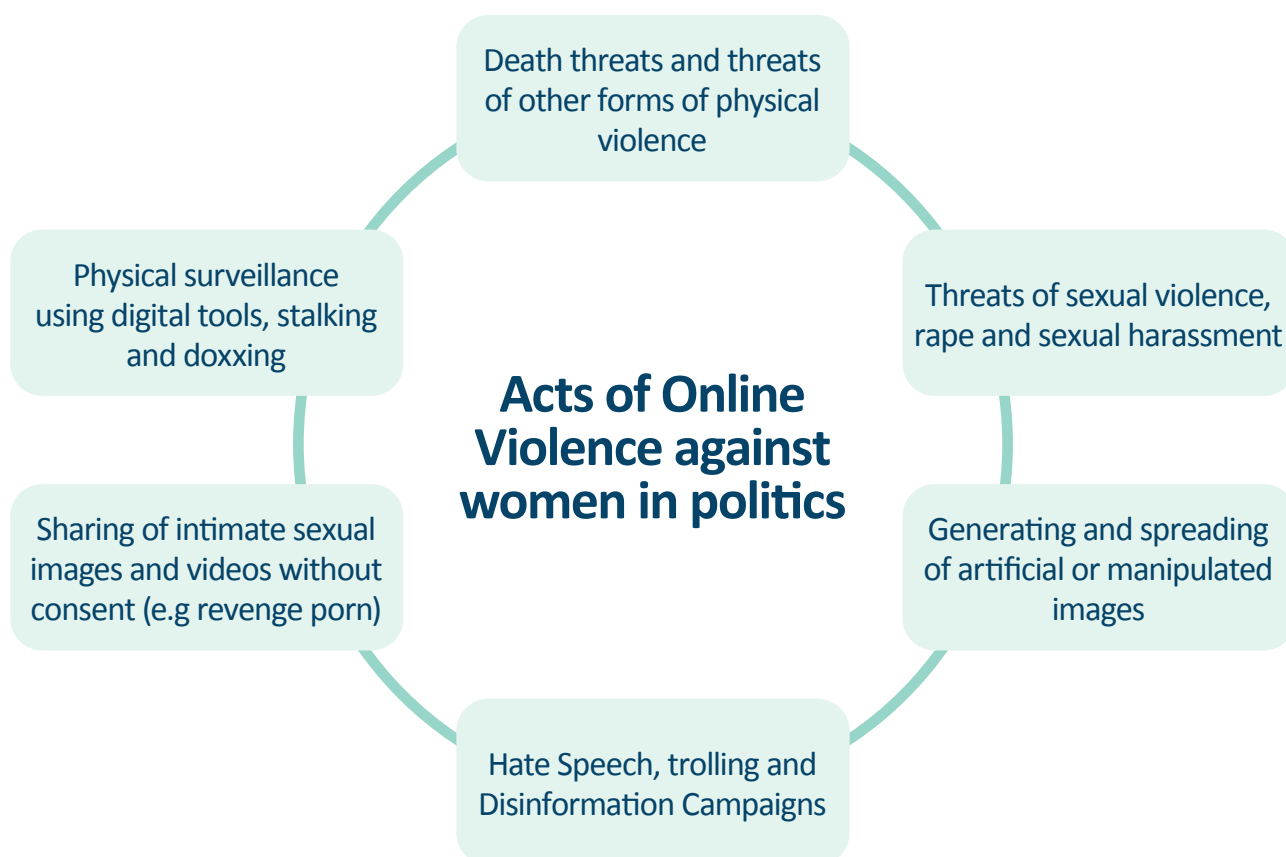


Figure 1: Acts of online violence against women in politics

How does online violence against women in local politics manifest? Examples from Zimbabwe

A study conducted with men and women in local government politics in Zimbabwe revealed that digital platforms and mobile applications are being used to target elected and aspiring women in local government leadership. It showed that applications like WhatsApp are being used to target women, subjecting them to death threats, sexual harassment, digital surveillance, and disinformation campaigns. The study also revealed that threats of violence that originate in the online space escalate to physical attacks against women politicians.

Research snapshot: We conducted a survey with leaders from six local government authorities in Zimbabwe. A total of 76 local government leaders responded to the survey, they included men and women elected to local government council, women councillors elected through the gender quota, and men and women that participated in the 2023 local government elections but were unelected. The study also conducted interviews with elected women and representatives of CSOs.

Intimidation and threats on WhatsApp: According to the survey, more women (57%) than men (16%) reported that WhatsApp was used to spread false information about them. Women were often accused of being prostitutes or engaging in sexual acts for political gain, while men were accused of being spies or involved in corruption. About 43% of women received threats on WhatsApp and 38% received direct threats to their physical safety. In comparison, 8% of male respondents received threats to their physical safety on WhatsApp. Additionally, 46% of women received threats on other social media platforms. More than 10 women that responded to the survey received death threats on WhatsApp, with messages like “we will kill you” or “you will die soon.”

These threats were not only directed at the women, threats also extended to their family members. In some cases, family members were physically assaulted for protecting the women from harm. One councillor recalled receiving WhatsApp messages including pictures that identified her children, the location of the schools they attended and their schedules. The messages warned her to be cautious and step down from her position. Though she did not step down, the threats generated sufficient concern for her to remove her children from formal schooling for an extended period.

WhatsApp – a platform for misinformation, intimidation and threats

- 72% of leaders surveyed (men & women) reported that WhatsApp was used to spread false information and rumours about them,
- 22 % (all women) reported that WhatsApp was used to circulate manipulated sexual images of them
- 51% stated that WhatsApp was used to threaten them
- 45% reported that WhatsApp was used to threaten their physical safety.
- 31% of these attacks happened in WhatsApp groups
- 42% of the respondents stated that they knew or could identify the person who was threatening them
- Only 27% reported these crimes or attacks to an external authority

Sexual harassment on WhatsApp: In addition to threats of physical violence and intimidation, WhatsApp was utilised to sexually harass female political candidates. The survey revealed that 40% of women experienced online sexual harassment, while only 1.3% of men reported the same. This difference shows that sexual violence in digital spaces is gendered and reflects the normalisation of sexual harassment of women. Women received WhatsApp messages containing rape threats, solicitations for sex, and abusive messages using derogatory terms in both English and Shona.

Female candidates in WhatsApp groups faced degrading attacks like body-shaming, accusations of prostitution, and attempting to seduce people's spouses. Unmarried women, young (18-30 years old), divorced or widowed women were disproportionately targeted. Their single status was labelled as a moral problem, making them unfit to represent the community.

Sexual harassment on Facebook and X: Sexual harassment and threats were very prevalent on social media platforms like X and Facebook. Opponents posted sexually suggestive images of women, leading to harassment from unknown users. Photoshopped images of women candidates in compromising positions were also shared.



The images above are an example of sexually suggestive posts made on X about an elected councillor. The original post resulted in sexually explicit comments being posted in response.

Online threats escalate to physical attacks: Testimonies from interviews included reports of physical attacks that originated from online threats and 36% of women surveyed reported that online threats escalated to physical attacks. In one case an aspiring woman councillor reported being physically attacked by five men after facing sexual harassment on X. In another extreme case an elected woman escaped several abduction attempts after receiving threatening voice notes on WhatsApp. The voice notes (recordings) were circulated in community groups and were also sent to her personal phone after she made a political decision that challenged corrupt actors that were misappropriating council land.

Impact of online violence against women in local politics

Online violence creates an environment of fear, hostility and intimidation. It limits women's political agency and significantly constrains their ability to fully participate in political processes, especially elections. Online violence can lead women to opt out of political engagements or to withdraw from elections to avoid intimidation and harassment. In many cases women are eventually forced to leave politics altogether, to protect themselves and their families.

The impact of online violence goes beyond the political campaign season, affecting not only the candidate, but also their family. Findings from the survey show that 34% of women stated that online misinformation had a negative impact on their family life. Accusations of sexual misconduct strained relationships with spouses and in-laws, while children of women leaders faced harassment and ridicule. One single mother shared how her community accused her of prostitution, leading her children to question their paternity.

Online intimidation also took a toll on the mental health of candidates, with 26% reporting mental health issues and 31% still feeling fear online even after the election. Women experienced depression, low self-esteem, shame, loss of trust, and isolation. The chronic stress that some women experienced resulted in physical illnesses including diabetes and high blood pressure. The effects of online violence, such as mental illness and trauma, persist long after the election is over. Even successful candidates carry this burden with some seeking out counseling to cope with online abuse.

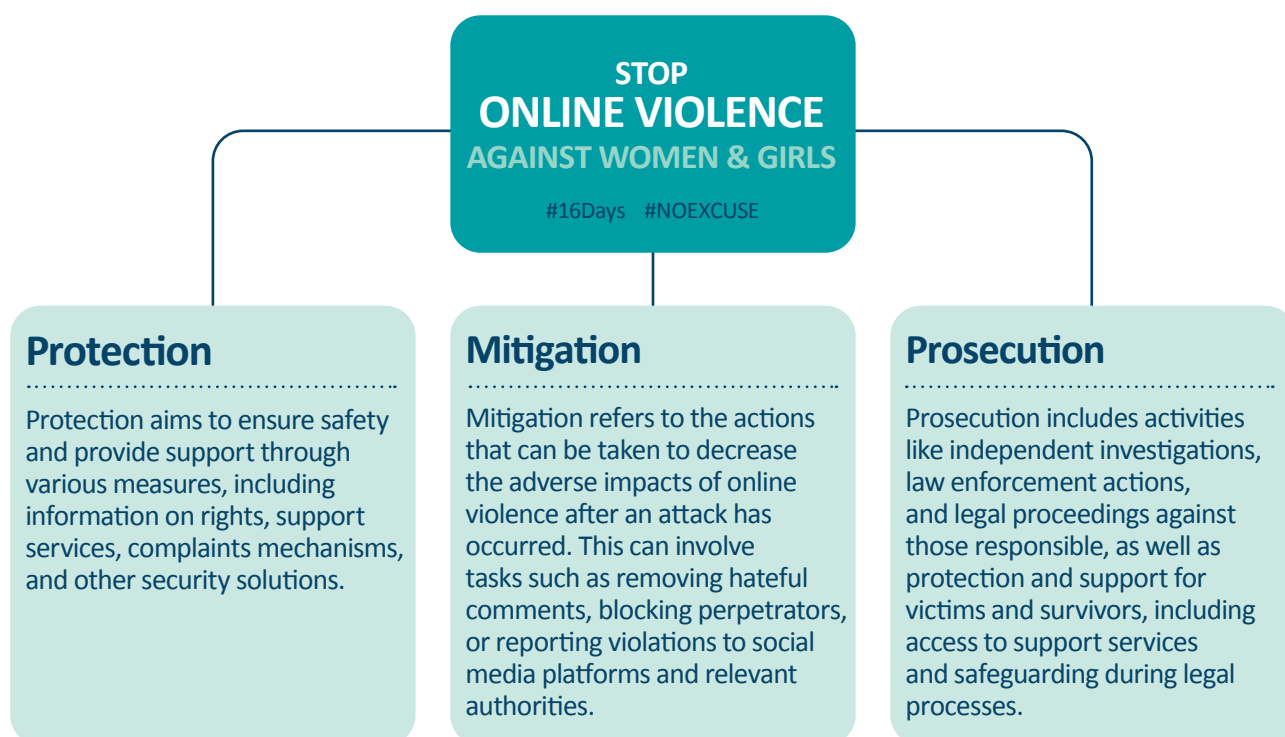


Project leader, Dr S. Mtero, presents project findings at ICLD Local Democracy Academy 2026, Visby, Sweden. Credit: Author

Addressing online violence against women in local politics: Protection, Mitigation and Prosecution

Digital platforms and messaging applications, particularly WhatsApp, are being used to subject women in politics to high levels of online violence. Evidence shows that these online threats frequently escalate into offline physical attacks. In response to this challenge, this toolbox will provide context-specific recommendations and strategies to address online violence.

The context-specific recommendations and strategies fall under three key pillars: Protection, Mitigation and Prosecution.² Protection includes all measures and strategies one can employ to safeguard themselves and their online profiles from online attacks and abuse. Mitigation refers to the actions one employs to reduce the damage and adverse outcomes if they are subjected to online violence. Prosecution is the last measure and refers to actions that can be pursued to hold perpetrators of online violence accountable for their actions, to prevent recurrent attacks, as well as actions to provide redress to victims of online violence.



² This framework is an adaptation of an OSCE framework to address violence against women in politics. The OSCE framing follows the guidelines prescribed by the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention). Please see: *Addressing Violence against Women in Politics In the OSCE Region*. Available at: <https://odibr.osce.org/odibr/530272>.

Protection: Guidance for women in politics

These are steps you can take to keep yourself safe online:

1. Secure your social media and WhatsApp accounts with 2 factor authentication to keep them safe from unauthorized users.
2. Use a VPN (Virtual Private Network) for encrypted online connections to prevent hacking and tracking.
3. Be vigilant on WhatsApp by blocking unknown users, hiding personal information, turning off read receipts, blocking users from adding you to groups and protecting your IP address. All these features are available through WhatsApp privacy settings
4. In case your phone is hacked, set up an App/Chat lock for WhatsApp and regularly check for any unusual activity by checking the 'linked devices' settings.
5. Use filters to delete hate speech and block accounts known for posting threats on your social media pages. Make use of the 'block all associated accounts' when blocking these users.
6. Block automated bot accounts with obscure names (e.g. @user273663806) or cartoon profile pictures.
7. Be knowledgeable and stay informed about online safety laws and regulations in your country and know where to report online attacks.
8. In Zimbabwe, report online violence to the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), ZRP Cyber Unit, or the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority. You can also report gender-based abuse to the Zimbabwe Gender Commission.

Mitigation: Guidance for women in politics

What should you do if you have been targeted or abused online?

These are the recommended steps to take if you are experiencing online violence and abuse:

1. Collect and save screenshots and screen recordings of all abusive content, such as texts, posts, tweets, or images. This information is crucial for law enforcement and other authorities as it provides important data. Screenshots and recordings also contain metadata that can help identify users, timestamps, and other pertinent details.
2. Report abusive posts and threats to the respective online platform (Facebook, Meta, etc.). Doing so may result in the removal of the post or the suspension of the user from the platform. These reports also serve as evidence for law enforcement or investigative authorities.
3. If the attack occurred on WhatsApp, consider changing your mobile number, especially if the threats concern your physical safety.
4. Report the abuse to the police or relevant authorities, providing them with all the evidence you have gathered. In Zimbabwe, reports can be made to the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), the ZRP Cyber Unit, and the ZRP Victim Friendly Unit for gender-based violence related crimes. Complaints can also be registered with the Zimbabwe Gender Commission, the Postal and Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Media Commission, and the Voluntary Media Council of Zimbabwe. Finally, women can also obtain advice and legal support from civil society organisations that focus on gender, democracy, and human rights (a list is provided at the end of this toolbox).
5. If possible, hire a forensic technology specialist to track the origin of abuse or images and provide detailed evidence to authorities.
6. Once you have collected evidence and made a report to authorities, block user accounts that have attacked you and any related accounts on other social media platforms. Avoid engaging with hateful posts or ‘trolls’ as responding to them could amplify the situation and spread misinformation.
7. If possible, make a brief public statement confirming that you have reported the abuse to authorities to discourage further attacks.
8. Stay patient and persistent after reporting the abuse. Follow up with investigators, the police, or relevant authorities. Keep in mind that police actions and court proceedings can take time, and accountability may only be achieved after elections or campaigns.
9. For your social and psychological well-being, consider discussing your experiences with a trusted advisor, professional counsellor, or mental health specialist. In Zimbabwe, political leaders can seek help from the Counselling Services Unit for victims of Organized Violence and Torture(OVT).

Prosecution: Guidance for local governments

A range of laws and regulations exist in Zimbabwe that preside over election offenses, gender-based violence and cyber security, no singular law focuses on online violence against women in politics.

Below are the relevant laws that can be utilised to prosecute online violence against women in politics:

- **The Cyber and Data Protection Act [Chapter 12:07]**

Law available at: <https://zimlil.org/akn/zw/act/2021/5/eng@2022-03-11>

- **The Electoral Act [Chapter 2:13]**

Law available at: [https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Electoral Act \(Consolidated as at 19-07-2023\).pdf](https://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Electoral%20Act%20(Consolidated%20as%20at%2019-07-2023).pdf)

- **The Domestic Violence Act [Chapter 5:16]**

Law available at: <https://www.veritaszim.net/node/146>

- **Chapter V of The Criminal Law (Codification and Reform) Act [Chapter 9:23]**

Law available at: [www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Crimcode \(updated to 2023.09\).pdf](http://www.veritaszim.net/sites/veritas_d/files/Crimcode%20(updated%20to%202023.09).pdf)

1. Advocate for the full enforcement of Part II (Section 164, 164 A-G) of the Cyber and Data Protection Act that provides guidance and sanctions for offences relating to electronic communications and materials.
2. Encourage all councillors (men and women) and community members to report online abuse to police and the relevant authorities.
3. Local government authorities should be educated and equipped to accept reports. They should also be equipped to support the police, national prosecutors, and judges to investigate, charge and prosecute perpetrators of these offenses.
4. Introduce a reporting mechanism/procedure for local government councillors to follow when they experience online abuse and violence against women in politics. This could take the form of a dedicated reporting desk that ensures the report is transmitted to police. This reporting procedure should be confidential to ensure the safety of the victim and avoid reprisal.
5. Introduce zero-tolerance policies within council for online abuse, during and after elections/by-elections. Recognising that attacks often come from candidates that are also contesting for a seat, local governments must emphasise that it is an offence to use digital tools to intimidate another political candidate or an elected councillor.
6. If an elected councillor engages in online violence, local government authorities should be compelled to report this to the police. Council should not provide a shield for perpetrators to operate with impunity.

Network of Support

The measures detailed above provide guidance to women in politics and local governments on protection, mitigation and prosecution of online violence. However, there are other key stakeholders that support women's political participation that can also take up key roles to support women in politics. This network of stakeholders includes civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations that work to support democracy, human rights, gender equality and women's political participation. Below is a list of organisations women in politics can reach out to or consult to receive support, training, legal and political advice and psycho-social support.

WALPE - Women's Academy for Leadership and Political Excellence

Capacitate women who want to run for political and community leadership through training and mentorship. This includes training in digital literacy, AI and online safety.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 78 424 0409 · Email: info@walpe.org.zw

Website: <https://walpe.org.zw/>

WiPSU - Women in Politics Support Unit

Provides support to women in elected public and political office. This includes training in digital literacy, media trainings and online safety.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 772 141 747 · Email: reception@wipsu.co.zw

Website: <https://www.wipsu.co.zw/>

Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) Zimbabwe

Legal support and litigation for women's rights and gender equality.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 242 253001-3 · +263 242 2928337

Email: communications@wlsazim.co.zw

Website: <https://wlsazim.co.zw/>

UN Women Zimbabwe

Provides support for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, Women's Leadership Political Participation, Women's Peace and Security.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 242 338836-41

Website: <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/eastern-and-southern-africa/zimbabwe/>

Gender Links

Provides support for gender equality through: research, advocacy, linking and learning, movement, and institution building.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 24 2798600

Email: zimmanager@genderlinks.org.za

Website: <https://www.genderlinks.org.za/countries/zimbabwe>

Zimbabwe Gender Commission

Receive and consider complaints from the public and investigate possible violations of rights relating to gender equality.

CONTACT:

Email: info@zgc.co.zw · complaints@zgc.co.zw

Toll free: 855 or +263 24225 0296/+263242701101

Website: <https://zgc.co.zw/>

Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights

ZLHR assists all victims of human rights violations by providing the following services free of charge: Litigation, Legal representation, Training, Research

CONTACT:

Bulawayo Hotline – 0773855635

Mutare Hotline – 0773855718

Harare Hotline – 0772257247

Email: info@zhlr.org

Website: <https://www.zlhr.org.zw/>

Women's Coalition of Zimbabwe (WCoZ)

Support with advocacy, capacity building, information dissemination and resource mobilization.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 242 701995/96

Mobile: +263 775 708 657

Email: coalitionzw@gmail.com

Website: <https://wcoz.org/>

Padare/Enkundleni

Organisation that supports men in Zimbabwe advocating for gender equality, justice, and the transformation of patriarchal norms.

CONTACT:

Phone: +263 77 330 2592

Email: admin@padare.org.zw

Counselling Services Unit

Provides psycho-social, medical, and psychiatric rehabilitation for victims of organised crimes, including victims of political violence.

CONTACT:

Toll Free Numbers:

Econet : (+263) 080 802 40

Netone : (+263) 080 100 85

General Line : (+263) 086 770 074 79

SMS : (+263) 0772 338 370

Emergency Line : (+263) 0774 824 176

Whatsapp : (+263) 0787 159 848

Email: csu@medco.co.zw

Website: <https://counsellingservicesunit.com/>

Conclusion

Addressing online violence against women in local politics requires interventions that support women, equipping them with the necessary tools and training to safeguard themselves online. However, beyond individual coping strategies, sustainable change will depend on strengthened institutional responses, greater accountability from political actors and digital platforms, enhanced support systems for women politicians. Laws and regulations that address online safety, gender-based violence and election offenses should be adapted and enforced to hold perpetrators of online violence accountable. Measures for protection, mitigation and prosecution can be effective and lead to safer digital ecosystems that enable women's free political participation.

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