

Weaponized Words:

**Online Gender-Based
Disinformation Targeting
Women Politicians in Iraq's
2025 National Elections**



Table of contents

Acknowledgements	3
Abstract	4
Literature Review	5
Methodology	9
Findings	12
First: Key Informant Interviews:	13
Second: Social Listening and Digital Analysis:	16
Key Themes Identified:	19
Recommendations	20
Legal and Institutional Reform	20
Awareness, Education, and Media Responsibility	20
Candidate Support and Capacity Building	21
Strengthen Online Moderation and Safety for Women Candidates	21
Promote Gender Equality and Digital Respect	21
Monitor Social Media During Elections	22
Amplify Positive Narratives About Women Leaders	22
Encourage Platforms to Share Election-Period Abuse Reports	22
Conclusion	23
References	24

Acknowledgements

This research was conducted and authored by Salam Omer. The study benefited significantly from the valuable contributions of Hiwa Ali Faraj, Shorsh Khalid, Sirwan Hussein, Inas Hassan, and Bwar Qadir, whose support in data collection, field engagement, and analytical input helped strengthen the research process and findings.

We also extend our sincere appreciation to Surabhi Srivastava, Director of Media Innovation at RNW Media, and Sana Naqvi, Senior Impact Manager at RNW Media, for their guidance in conceptualizing the research framework, coordinating the process, and providing critical review and feedback throughout the study. Their support and insights were instrumental in ensuring the rigor, relevance, and overall quality of this research. The design and layout of this report was done by Nana Halonen of Naksu Design.

Abstract

This follow-up study, which is an extension of RNW Media's research on online Gender Based Disinformation in MENA, explores the growing threat of online gender-based disinformation (GBD) against women politicians during Iraq's 2025 parliamentary elections. As digital platforms like Facebook and TikTok become central to political discourse, they have also become arenas for targeted cyber-attacks on female candidates. The follow-up study investigates how disinformation, ranging from moral accusations to doctored media, was weaponized to undermine women's credibility, discourage participation, and perpetuate harmful gender norms.

Using a mixed-methods approach, the study draws on key informant interviews (KIIs) and social listening analysis. Interviews were conducted with female candidates, civil society actors, and political observers across seven provinces from the North to the South of the country, while digital monitoring was performed on over 110 Arabic and Kurdish-language Facebook posts. The findings reveal that women were disproportionately targeted by coordinated attacks involving fake accounts, edited media, and hate speech. Content was rarely policy-focused, instead centering on women's personal lives, appearance, and perceived violations of traditional roles.

The follow-up study highlights how systemic disinformation is used to silence women, especially those advocating for gender equality, legal reforms, or sexual and reproductive health rights. Disinformation campaigns often leveraged tribal, political, and religious networks, exploiting platforms with limited regulation and accountability. These attacks not only harmed individual candidates but also relatively distorted the democratic process by fostering fear, discouragement, and public distrust in women leaders.

The study concludes with recommendations for reform, emphasizing the need for stronger laws, content moderation, public education, and institutional accountability. It urges stakeholders, including political parties, social media platforms, and civil society to collaborate in protecting women's right to participate in politics without fear of online violence. This follow-up study contributes valuable insight into the digital barriers to gender equality in Iraq and provides a foundation for future advocacy and policy action.



1

Literature Review

Social media in Iraq has emerged as a covert weapon for targeting women through disinformation, cyber violence, and hate speech. These attacks significantly hinder women's political participation and visibility in public life, especially affecting activists, women in leadership roles, and those with economic independence (University of Baghdad, n.d.). Disinformation, defined as the deliberate manipulation of information to influence public perception, often includes misleading images, hate speech, and the sexualization of women in politics and media (elbarlament, 2022; Arab Facts Hub, n.d.).

The phenomenon has become more sophisticated with the use of artificial intelligence to create fake content, deepfakes, altered videos, and false audio clips that aim to undermine women's dignity and credibility. This review analyzes findings from 18 studies and monitoring reports from Iraq between 2021 and 2025, examining the scale, impacts, and drivers of gender-based electronic disinformation.

Iraq's 2024 census reported a population of over 46 million, with women comprising 49.8% of this number (Central Statistical Organization, 2024). Although women were barred from parliamentary participation before 1980, progress has been made due to legal reforms. In the 2025 parliamentary elections, women secured 84 out of 329 seats, just above the 25% quota enshrined in the Iraqi Constitution (IHEC, 2025). However, this marks a decline from the 97 seats won in 2021.

In the December 2023 provincial council elections, 76 women were elected, 17 of whom won seats without relying on quota mechanisms (IHEC, 2025). Despite this progress, women remain underrepresented in decision-making roles. As of 2025, only three women held ministerial positions in the 23-member cabinet led by Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani (Iraqi Parliament, n.d.).

Cyberbullying is the most prevalent form of online violence faced by Iraqi women. Internationally, one in three women faces online abuse, with reports suggesting that 90–95% of these attacks occur through digital means (UN Iraq, 2024). In Iraq, 21% of women have reported experiencing cyber violence, and 43% have been subjected to repeat incidents (KirkukNow, 2024). Shockingly, 31% of men admit to committing such acts (KirkukNow, 2024).

Tactics include defamation, threats, impersonation through fake accounts, and the spread of manipulated images or false stories. Technology has made these attacks easier and more anonymous, contributing to the psychological and social harm suffered by women. In post-conflict Iraq, women are particularly vulnerable due to

marginalization and exclusion from peace and political processes (UNFPA Iraq, 2024). In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), 226 women reported cyber violence in 2024, but NGOs believe the actual number is significantly higher (WOLA, 2024). Among these cases, 70 women specifically filed complaints over non-consensual sharing of their images and videos. A national survey of 117 respondents revealed that 69.2% had encountered some form of cyber violence, with defamation and disinformation being the most common (SecDev Foundation, 2025; UN Women, 2024). These attacks disproportionately target women's appearance, personal lives, and relationships rather than their qualifications, effectively reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes and discouraging political participation (Arab Facts Hub, n.d.).

An earlier survey conducted in 2021 attributed cyber abuse to ruling parties (25%), armed groups (15%), religious figures (14%), and tribal leaders (8%) (PFAA, 2024). During election periods, disinformation surges as part of smear campaigns. Tribal rhetoric and religious discourse often urge voters to support male candidates and discredit female ones (IHEC, 2025). A monitoring report recorded 245 incidents of violence during the 2025 elections, most targeting women (Monitoring Coalition, 2025). Gender-based disinformation contributes to serious psychological consequences including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Monitoring Coalition, 2025). Half of female internet users in the Arab region, including Iraq, report feeling unsafe online, particularly human rights defenders and political activists (UNFPA Iraq, 2024). For example, Turkmen politician Muna Qahwachi was heavily attacked online in 2024 after opposing a court ruling on minority representation. Her photos and videos were doctored and spread across platforms to damage her reputation (UN Women Arab States, 2022). During the 2019 protests, similar tactics were used against women by labeling them as anti-Islamic or pro-Western and publishing sexually explicit fake images to intimidate and discredit them (elbarlament, 2022).

These efforts have forced many women to withdraw from political life. Public perception has been distorted by repeated portrayals of women as weak, incompetent, or corrupt, and political posters of female candidates have been vandalized, often in sexually harassing ways (KirkukNow, 2024). Prominent women have also had their social media accounts hacked and personal data weaponized against them (elbarlament, 2022).

Gender-based disinformation in Iraq is rooted in political, cultural, economic, and legal dynamics. Many perpetrators perceive women's increasing visibility, education, and leadership as a threat to male dominance, perpetuating gender stereotypes. These actions are often justified under traditional or religious frameworks that promote patriarchal control (Arab Facts Hub, n.d.).

Stigma and gatekeeping extend into digital spaces, where women are silenced, monitored, or excluded from expressing political views. Misrepresentation campaigns are frequently politically motivated, used to sideline opponents or reinforce conservative norms. Some social media pages amplify this disinformation to gain popularity, prioritizing virality over truth (UN Women Arab States, 2022). This was evident during protests against amendments to Iraq's personal status law, when thousands of deceptive posts were spread against women (elbarlament, 2022). Surveys indicate that 41% of Iraqi women believe that police intervention is key to addressing online violence, while others stress the need for stronger government policies, public education, and religious leadership to counter cyber abuse (SJC, 2024). Despite growing awareness, existing literature lacks comprehensive, gender-sensitive analysis of digital abuse in Iraq. Most studies rely on limited surveys and rarely account for the intersectionality of victims' experiences. There is a lack of disaggregated data comparing abuse against men and women, and most follow-up study fails to fully examine how disinformation affects political participation and public trust (Arab Reform Initiative, 2023).

Many studies also fall short of offering viable solutions or evaluating institutional accountability. Additionally, the rapid evolution of digital tools, especially AI, has outpaced regulatory responses. There is an urgent need for coordinated action between civil society, electoral bodies, digital platforms, and legislators to protect women from digital gender-based violence.

Gender-based disinformation is a serious and growing threat to women's political participation in Iraq. As this review has shown, women face an array of cyber-attacks that aim to humiliate, silence, and delegitimize them. Despite quotas and increased representation, the digital sphere remains a hostile environment. Addressing this requires intersectional follow-up study, accountability frameworks, and multi-sectoral interventions to build a safer and more inclusive digital and political space.

2

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that combines qualitative inquiry with digital analysis to examine gender-based disinformation targeting women politicians during Iraq's November 2025 parliamentary election campaign. The methodology integrates social listening and digital analysis with Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in order to capture both the dynamics of online disinformation and the lived experiences of those affected. This approach enables the study to examine not only how gender-based disinformation circulates in digital spaces, but also how it impacts women's political participation and freedom of expression.

The social listening and digital analysis component focused on monitoring political content published on Facebook during the official election campaign period. Content was systematically reviewed to identify recurring narratives, keywords, hashtags, and patterns associated with gender-based disinformation. Particular attention was paid to content employing gendered language, moral accusations, ridicule, and the manipulation or fabrication of images and videos. Where relevant, amplification patterns were observed, including repeated circulation of similar messages and indications of synchronized posting behavior, to better understand how disinformation spread and gained visibility.

Facebook was selected as the primary platform for social listening, as the majority of interviewees identified it as the main source of online violence targeting women candidates in Iraq. Data was monitored and collected in both Arabic and Kurdish from dozens of Facebook pages and accounts, using a wide range of relevant keywords. The monitoring period extended from the start of the election campaign on October 1 until November 11, which marked election day. The analysis covered content published by media outlets, political parties, activists, and other influential unofficial pages, as well as public accounts and pages of women candidates who participated in the elections.

A total sample of 111 posts in Arabic and Kurdish was selected for in-depth analysis. In response to the 51 Arabic-language posts, 44,969 comments were recorded, of which 11,242 were analyzed. Meanwhile, 4,860 comments were written in response to the 60 Kurdish-language posts, with 1,215 comments selected for analysis. The comments selected for analysis represented 25% of the total comments posted in response to the analyzed posts. In parallel, the qualitative component of the study consisted of semi-structured Key Informant Interviews conducted with women political candidates, male politicians, political observers, civil society actors, journalists, and individuals directly involved in election monitoring and media engagement. The interviews explored participants' experiences and observations of online gender-based disinformation, including the types of narratives used, the actors involved, the degree of coordination behind attacks, and the digital platforms most frequently utilized during the campaign period.

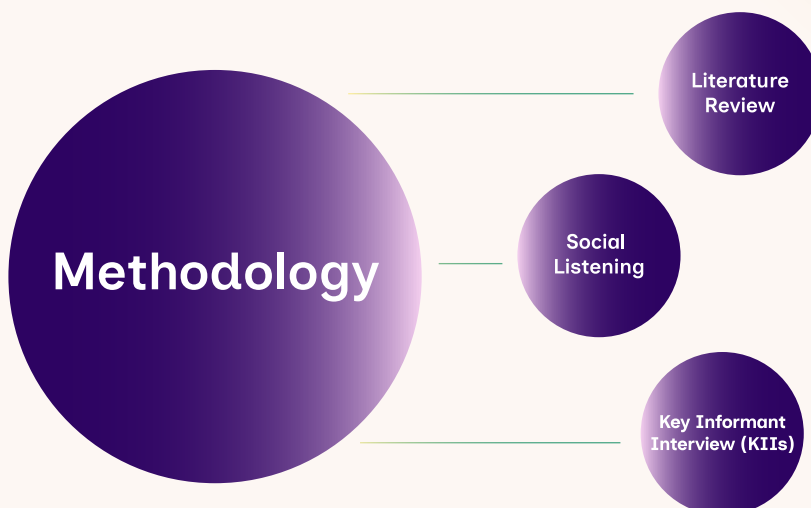
The interviews also examined the personal, social, and political impacts of online gender-

based disinformation on women candidates' participation in electoral processes and their freedom of expression. Particular attention was given to testimonies related to women politicians advocating for gender equality, women's rights, and, where relevant, sexual and reproductive health and rights. Interviewees were additionally invited to reflect on existing responses and to propose recommendations and strategies to address gender-based disinformation targeting women politicians in Iraq's digital spaces.

The interviews were conducted between early December 2025 and December 10, 2026, following the conclusion of the general elections across Iraq. A specialized research team operating across seven Iraqi provinces carried out the interviews. These provinces were selected from Iraq's Northern, Central, and Southern regions, based on their demographic composition and levels of religious, ethnic, and sectarian diversity. Consideration was also given to factors such as the presence of minority groups, the degree of multi-party competition, and levels of women's public and political participation. Provinces such as Nineveh and Kirkuk, both of which experienced ISIS control in the past decade, were included as illustrative cases.

The interview sample included individuals of all genders, both successful and unsuccessful parliamentary candidates, survivors of online violence or individuals who experienced it and chose not to remain silent, government and party officials, members of the Electoral Commission, feminist activists, and journalists who monitored the electoral process within their institutional frameworks.

All interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with recurring patterns coded across key analytical categories, including disinformation narratives, actors, forms of violence, coordination patterns, platforms used, and perceived impacts. Findings from the social listening component were used to contextualize and triangulate the qualitative data. All findings presented in this study are grounded in Key Informant Interview testimonies and observed digital patterns.





3

Findings

First: Key Informant Interviews:

In the context of Iraq's parliamentary elections held in November 2025, women candidates experienced a significant wave of gender-based online disinformation and cyber violence. This study is based on 10 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted during the official election campaign period, and provides a firsthand look at the narratives, actors, and impact of this disinformation, as well as the views of those most affected. Interviewees included female candidates, civil society representatives, and political observers who directly witnessed or experienced these phenomena.

According to the KIIs, women were disproportionately targeted throughout the campaign. While both male and female candidates faced some level of cyber violence, KIIs consistently emphasized that women were more frequently and more aggressively attacked. Importantly, the disinformation was rarely focused on political content. As several informants pointed out, the candidates themselves, not their platforms or policies, were the primary targets. One respondent stated, "The attack was not on her [politicians] platform, but on her ideas and her presence as a woman." Many women were mocked for their names, appearances, or speech patterns. On TikTok, for example, a candidate recalled being ridiculed with comments like, "A bird is going to parliament." In Kurdish culture, personal names often carry specific meanings. In this case, the candidate's name "Kew," which translates into English as "Chukar Partridge," was deliberately exploited in online attacks.

Participants detailed how videos were edited to misrepresent candidates' voices and faces. Old videos were circulated as new to damage reputations, while false claims and accusations of immoral behavior were shared widely. One interviewee cited the case of Isar Saeed, a 29-year-old candidate from the National Sunni Hasim Coalition, who was falsely described online as an "American mercenary" across dozens of Facebook pages. Another respondent added, "They didn't care what I was campaigning for, they just tried

“

They didn't care what I was campaigning for, they just tried to humiliate me.

to humiliate me.”

The types of violence mentioned in KIIs included offensive comments, edited photos and videos, fake news, baseless accusations, impersonation, and digitally manipulated content. Informants agreed that this wasn't random; it was often calculated and specifically targeted at undermining women's legitimacy as political actors.

When asked about who was behind these attacks, KIIs identified multiple actors. Women spoke of attacks from political rivals, including members of their own parties, as well as opposing parties and organized groups. Some KIIs described how entire networks of fake accounts were created by certain parties during the election period, with the explicit goal of spreading false information. As one interviewee explained, “They created dozens of pages and accounts to attack us, spending huge money on this; it wasn't just one or two people.” Others noted that some attacks were carried out by individuals acting independently, including general social media users.

KIIs confirmed that TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram were the main platforms used to carry out these campaigns. TikTok was mentioned most frequently, with one respondent calling it “the most widespread and dangerous platform.” Others noted that unofficial partisan media pages and groups played a major role in spreading these attacks, often blurring the line between grassroots sentiment and organized harassment.

Importantly, many interviewees believed the attacks were partially or fully coordinated. Some described them as “programmed,” especially during the peak of the campaign season. A few informants noted that parties didn't just encourage these narratives, they funded and orchestrated them. One participant stated, “This was planned. They created accounts for a short time during elections, attacked us, and then disappeared.”



The impact of the disinformation was profound. While some women remained in the race and continued campaigning, others described how the attacks drove them into silence, damaged their mental health, or forced them to withdraw. One interviewee shared that

her colleague had attempted suicide after being targeted in fake sexualized videos, saying, “She couldn’t take the humiliation.” Another respondent reflected, “If I wasn’t a psychologist, I wouldn’t have been able to handle the insults I received.” The effects also extended to women’s families and communities. As one candidate stated, “It wasn’t just me, they went after my family too. My whole household was affected.” Candidates in Basra and southern provinces reported less severe impact, largely due to their prior involvement with civil society organizations and training that helped them manage such attacks.

KIIs also explored the reasons behind this violence. While some respondents acknowledged that women who raised topics like motherhood or the Personal Status Law faced backlash, most emphasized that the violence was rooted in broader social and political dynamics. One said, “It wasn’t about reproductive health, it was about control.” Another explained, “In some provinces, people simply don’t believe women belong in politics.” Many also pointed to the patriarchal and tribal structure of society, especially in conservative areas like Nineveh, as a major factor. Others noted that younger and poorer women, especially those who had succeeded in previous elections, were particularly targeted by those trying to prevent them from winning again.

Political parties, as described in the KIIs, often failed to support female candidates. One respondent said, “Parties rarely respect women candidates. When trouble comes, they step away.” Others noted that gender bias in party financing was common, with men receiving more resources and visibility, making the political arena more gendered. In some cases, parties nominated women solely to fill legal quotas. One informant said, “Some parties didn’t even have women on their lists, they just asked NGOs to find them names at the last minute.” Another emphasized, “They nominate based on beauty, not competence.”

Despite the harassment, few women filed formal complaints. Interviewees cited fear of damaging their reputation, lack of trust in the police and judicial system, and the absence of specialized legal mechanisms as reasons for staying silent. “I didn’t think it would help,” one said. “Too many procedures, and the government doesn’t know how to find these people.” A representative from a civil society organization said they had received multiple complaints from candidates but had seen little follow-up from the authorities.

“

(Political) parties rarely respect women candidates. When trouble comes, they step away.

The role of the media was also discussed at length. Several KIIs said that the media often amplified the abuse by focusing on women's mistakes, choosing inflammatory headlines, or publishing manipulated content. As one respondent put it, "They chase clicks, not the truth." Others noted that some media outlets were directly tied to political parties and contributed to the targeting. At the same time, informants argued that the media could play a key role in fighting disinformation, through monitoring, fact-checking, and awareness-raising. Unfortunately, "counter-campaigns were weak," as one woman described it, and few media outlets actively worked to correct false stories or protect candidates.

The data gathered through these Key Informant Interviews during the campaign period of Iraq's November 2025 parliamentary elections paints a clear picture: gender-based disinformation online is not only a barrier to women's political participation, it is an attack on democratic values. As Iraq continues its journey toward inclusive governance, protecting women in politics must become a national priority. Without real change in law, policy, and social norms, women will continue to pay the highest price for trying to create a space for themselves.

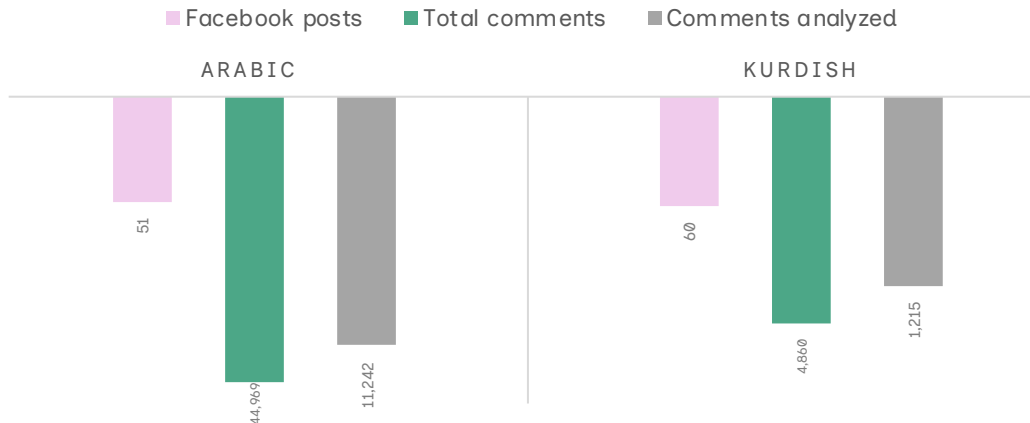
02 Findings

Second Social Listening and Digital Analysis:

This public sentiment analysis is based on social media comments related to women candidates during Iraq's most recent parliamentary elections. The data was drawn from Arabic and Kurdish language comments collected through social listening on Facebook. Keywords and selected comment samples were reviewed to identify recurring themes and to assess the overall tone of public discourse and narratives.

Public sentiment toward women candidates during the last Iraqi elections reveals deeply embedded gender bias, expressed through widespread online gendered discourse. Based on a thorough analysis of thousands of Arabic and English social media comments, the overall tone was overwhelmingly negative, with more than 75% of the sampled content expressing disapproval, hostility, or mockery toward female political figures.

COMMENTS ANALYZED BY LANGUAGE



Many of the comments targeted women not for their political positions or policies, but rather for their appearance, family background, or personal lives. Common themes included derogatory remarks about physical features, such as makeup, cosmetic surgery, and clothing, as well as gendered insults rooted in misogyny and harassment. Phrases like “plastic doll,” “quota monster,” and “she belongs in the kitchen” were repeatedly used to delegitimize their public presence. This illustrates how public commentary often reduces female candidates to their looks or social gender roles, rather than evaluating their political merit and plans.

Another recurring sentiment was opposition to the parliamentary quota system for women. Critics frequently accused female candidates of gaining office through undeserved privilege, citing low vote counts and family ties as evidence of illegitimacy. Many comments reinforced the idea that women could only enter politics through male relatives, fathers, husbands, or tribes, rather than personal achievement. This reflects both resistance to gender equality measures and broader skepticism about democratic inclusion and processes.

In addition to misogyny, some comments included vulgar and sexually explicit harassment, demonstrating how digital platforms are being used as tools to intimidate and silence women. This toxic environment poses serious challenges to inclusive political participation and highlights the need for targeted interventions. Efforts to counter this trend must include improved content moderation, digital literacy, and civic education promoting respect for women in public and political life.

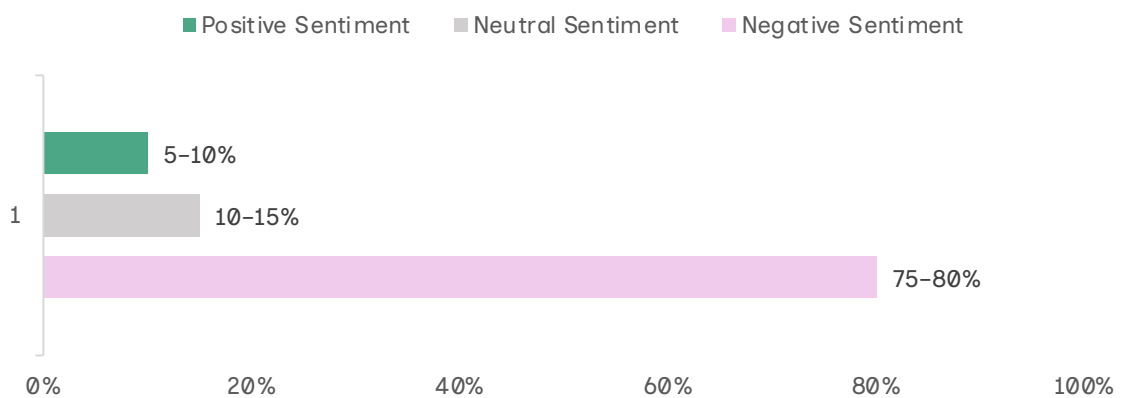
The overwhelming majority of public sentiment toward women candidates in the Iraqi elections was negative, with many comments displaying clear misogyny, ridicule, and gender-based discrimination. Sexual harassment, attacks on appearance, and criticism of the quota system were especially dominant. This suggests the urgent need for digital literacy, gender sensitivity, and electoral education campaigns.

Another recurring sentiment was opposition to the parliamentary quota system for women. Critics frequently accused female candidates of gaining office through undeserved privilege, citing low vote counts and family ties as evidence of illegitimacy. Many comments reinforced the idea that women could only enter politics through male relatives, fathers, husbands, or tribes, rather than personal achievement. This reflects both resistance to gender equality measures and broader skepticism about democratic inclusion.

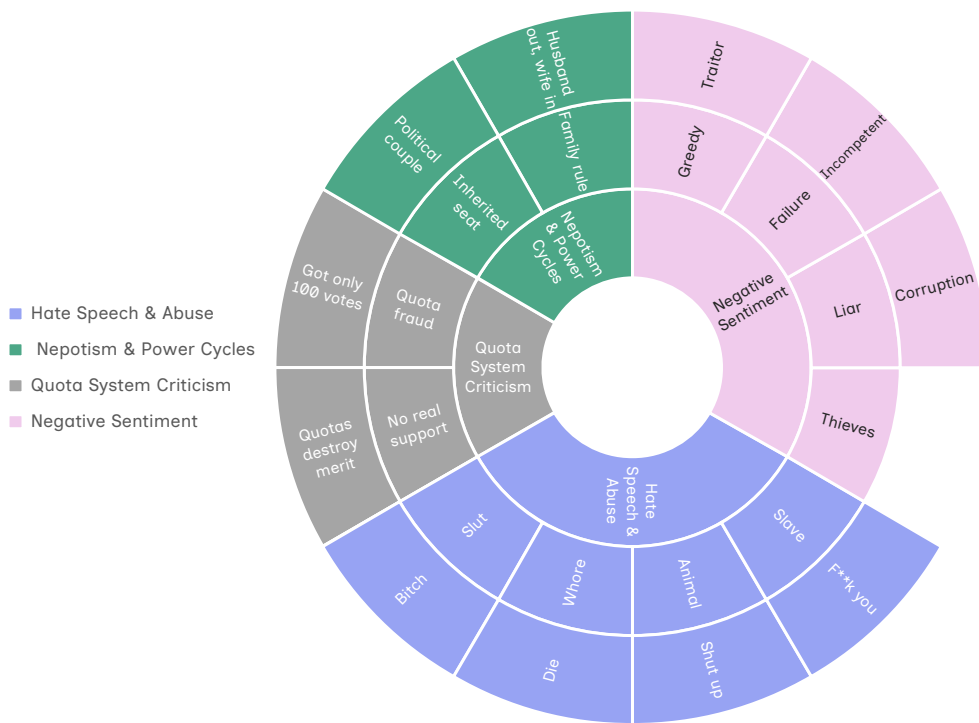
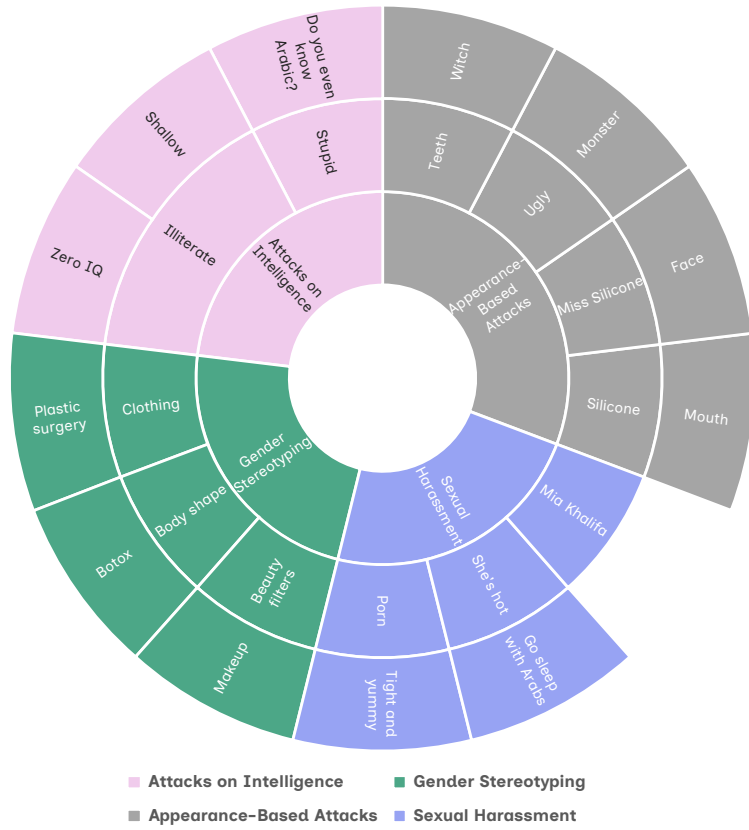
In addition to misogyny, some comments included vulgar and sexually explicit harassment, demonstrating how digital platforms are being used as tools to intimidate and silence women. This toxic environment poses serious challenges to inclusive political participation and highlights the need for targeted interventions. Efforts to counter this trend must include improved content moderation, digital literacy, and civic education promoting respect for women in public life.

The overwhelming majority of public sentiment toward women candidates in the Iraqi elections was negative, with many comments displaying clear misogyny, ridicule, and gender-based discrimination. Sexual harassment, attacks on appearance, and criticism of the quota system were especially dominant. This suggests the urgent need for digital literacy, gender sensitivity, and electoral education campaigns.

Overall Sentiment Distribution:



Key Themes Identified:



Recommendations

Legal and Institutional Reform

Enact a specific law addressing online gender-based violence and disinformation.

Strengthen and enforce existing laws to effectively protect women candidates.

Punish individuals responsible for publishing fake images and videos of women.

Strengthen the cybercrime authority and train specialized experts to address online gender-based violence.

Activate law enforcement agencies during election campaigns and simplify complaint/reporting procedures.

Awareness, Education, and Media Responsibility

Raise public awareness about online gender-based violence and disinformation.

Involve religious and educational leaders due to their social influence.

Improve media literacy among the public and recognize that laws alone are insufficient.

Require media outlets to monitor comments and train staff in responsible social media use.

Media should avoid sensationalism that targets women candidates; choose headlines and visuals carefully.

Dedicate media space to correcting misinformation, fake images, and manipulated videos.

Address the misuse of party-controlled media to harm women and competitors during campaigns.

Candidate Support and Capacity Building

Provide training for women candidates on digital safety, social media, and device protection.

Train women on how to prevent and respond to online attacks before election campaigns.

Encourage women to file complaints and emphasize the laws that protect them.

Promote collaboration between women candidates and civil society organizations to develop protection plans.

Ensure political parties offer genuine support, fair funding, and visibility to female candidates.

Strengthen Online Moderation and Safety for Women Candidates

Improve content moderation in Arabic and Kurdish on social media platforms, and train women candidates to manage and report online abuse.

Promote Gender Equality and Digital Respect

Launch public campaigns to counter online misogyny, support women's political roles, and clarify the purpose of the quota system.

Monitor Social Media During Elections

Include social media tracking in election oversight to detect harassment, disinformation, and threats targeting female candidates.

Amplify Positive Narratives About Women Leaders

Only 5–10% of comments were positive. Media outlets, NGOs, and influencers should produce and circulate stories and narratives that celebrate women candidates' accomplishments, experience, and resilience, shifting public discourse from mockery to merit.

Encourage Platforms to Share Election-Period Abuse Reports

Facebook and similar platforms should be asked to publish transparency reports focused on elections, disaggregating abuse by gender and language. This can support further academic and civil society monitoring and accountability.

Conclusion:

This follow-up study has uncovered the dominant narratives of gender-based disinformation (GBD) that targeted women politicians in Iraq's 2025 parliamentary elections. The most frequent narratives included moral accusations, appearance-based ridicule, and the questioning of women's intelligence and legitimacy. Terms such as "quota monster," "plastic doll," and "unqualified" were frequently used to undermine women's public credibility. These narratives reinforced traditional gender roles and actively discouraged women's participation in political life, especially when they challenged social norms or advocated for rights-based issues, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Key actors behind these disinformation campaigns varied. While some attacks originated from anonymous users or fake accounts, many were traced to political rivals, partisan media outlets, and even intra-party opponents. Evidence from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) suggested that these campaigns were often coordinated, with content amplified by unofficial media pages and influencers to increase visibility and public reach. The use of AI tools, such as deepfakes or manipulated videos, added a dangerous layer of sophistication to these efforts, making it difficult for candidates to defend themselves or restore their reputations.

The lived experiences of women candidates were central to this study. Interviewees consistently reported that the attacks were deeply personal, aimed not at their political programs but at their gender, appearance, and personal choices. Candidates who spoke about women's rights or SRHR were particularly targeted. Many experienced lasting emotional and social harm, ranging from mental health issues to family distress. Some women withdrew from public life entirely, while others endured the abuse with limited institutional or party support. The lack of formal complaint mechanisms and trust in enforcement systems further compounded the harm.

Based on these findings, the study proposes targeted and actionable recommendations to counter gender-based disinformation. These include legal reforms to criminalize digital gender-based violence, media literacy campaigns to reshape public discourse, and stronger support systems for women in politics. Social media platforms must also be held accountable for content moderation in both Arabic and Kurdish. Most importantly, protecting women's digital participation must become a national priority, central to democratic integrity and inclusive governance. Without decisive action, disinformation will continue to erode women's political voice and the quality of Iraq's democratic processes.



References:

Arab Facts Hub. (n.d.). [Follow-up study on gender-based disinformation.](#)

Central Statistical Organization. (2024) [Iraq census data.](#)

elbarlament. (2022). [Aida Report on digital gender violence.](#)

IHEC. (2025). [Election results.](#)

Iraqi Parliament. (n.d.). [Iraq constitution.](#)

UN Women. (2022). [Cyber violence statistics.](#)

Monitoring Coalition. (2025). [Election violence report.](#)

PFAA. (2024). [Women's political participation in Iraq.](#)

SecDev Foundation. (2025). [Iraq digital violence report.](#)

SJC. (2024). [Iraq judiciary report.](#)

UN Iraq. (2024). [UN campaign against online violence.](#)

UNFPA Iraq. (2024). [VAW Strategy Arabic - Online Version.pdf](#)

UN Women. (2024). [Report on ending violence.](#)

UN Women Arab States. (2022). [Key findings report.](#)

University of Baghdad. (n.d.). [Definition of disinformation.](#)

Kirkuk Now. (2024). [Cyber violence in Kurdistan.](#)

Arab Reform Initiative. (2023). [Women in Iraqi politics.](#)

This research paper is
developed by RNW Media.

Find more about our work
at [rnw.media](https://www.rnw.media)



RNW Media

Nieuwe Havenweg 51-H
1216 BL Hilversum

www.rnw.media