Silenced with a Click

Digital Violence Against Female Candidates in Jordan's 2024 Parliamentary Elections

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The Karak Castle Center for Consultations and Training

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Acknowledgments

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Karak Castle Center for Consultations and Training

This women-led organization empowers women and youth across Jordan. With a focus on political, economic, and legal empowerment, KCC promotes democratic values, human rights, and gender equality through programs that address electoral participation, legislative reform, and digital violence. It operates the Electoral Violence Observatory Against Women—a national monitoring mechanism launched in 2022.

International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

IDRC supports and funds research and innovation initiatives in developing countries to drive global change. It invests in high-quality research in developing countries, shares knowledge with researchers and policymakers for greater uptake and use—and mobilizes global alliances to build a more sustainable and inclusive world.

The SecDev Foundation

Since 2011, this Canada-based NGO has worked globally to promote digital resilience among vulnerable populations—especially women, youth and at-risk civil society organizations. The Foundation's Salam@ team tackles digital violence against women across the MENA region.

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Introduction: Lessons from 2024 for the Road to 2026

As Jordan prepares for its local councils' elections expected in mid-2026, the experience of 2024 parliamentary elections of female candidates, offers a cautionary tale. The promise of equal political participation for women was marred by a surge of online abuse, misinformation, and coordinated defamation targeting female candidates. While electoral reforms have opened more seats and promoted representation, the digital sphere has become a battleground where women are undermined not by votes, but by viral comments and orchestrated attacks.

This report presents a comprehensive investigation into the patterns, sources, and effects of digital violence faced by women who ran in the 2024 parliamentary elections. Drawing on interviews with 167 candidates, analysis of over 141,000 Facebook comments, and field monitoring, the report not only documents this violence but offers actionable strategies to prevent it in the run-up to 2026.

Scope and Methodology

In the 2024 Jordanian parliamentary elections, 954 candidates competed across local lists, including 195 women. Of these, 170 were candidates for quota seats, and 187 were on general district lists. Male candidates accounted for 759 individuals across 174 local lists and 25 general district lists included 686 candidates, 499 of whom were male. The distribution highlights persistent gender imbalances in electoral participation.

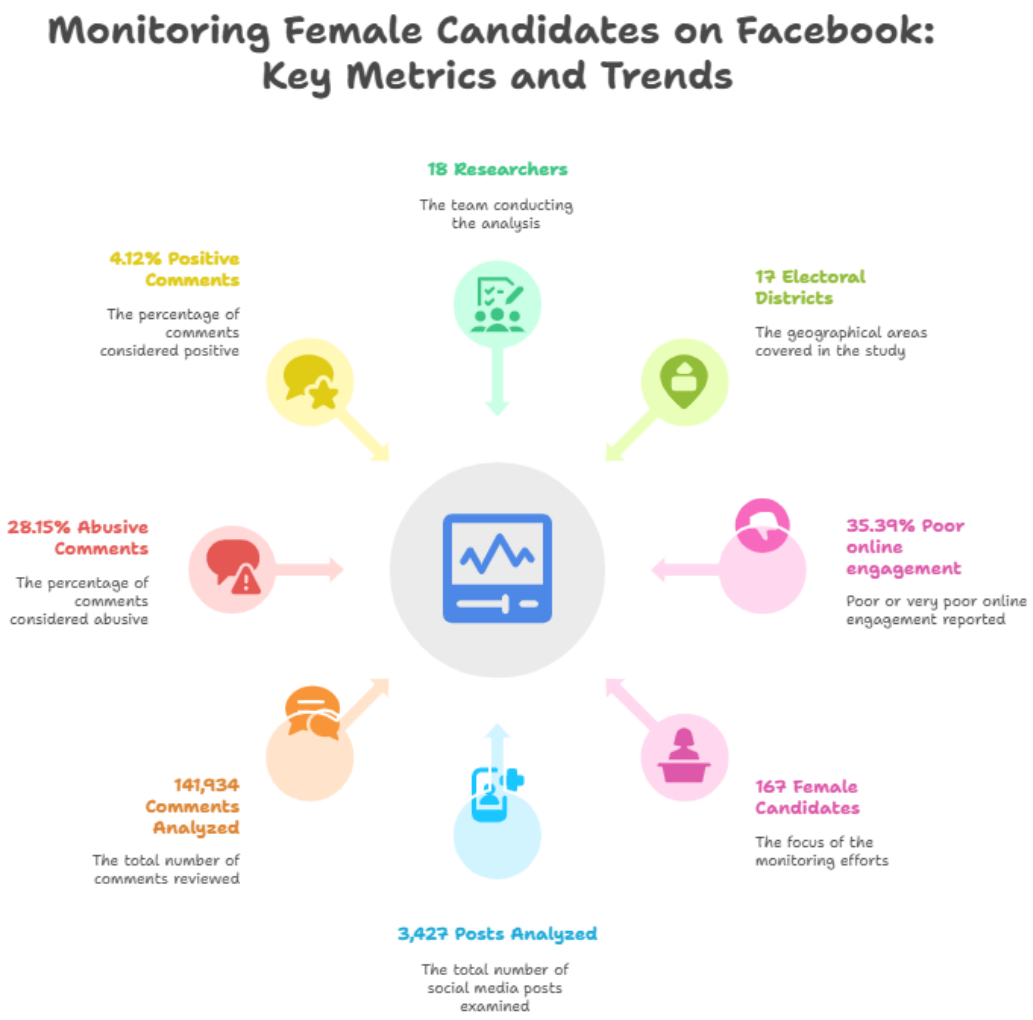
The gender distribution of candidates varied significantly across electoral districts. Key observations include:

- **Lowest Female Representation:** Zarqa Governorate recorded the lowest percentage of female candidates at 12.24%.
- **Highest Female Representation:** Aqaba Governorate had the highest percentage of female candidates at 34.78%.
- **General District Representation:** Female candidates comprised 27.26% of total candidates in the general district.

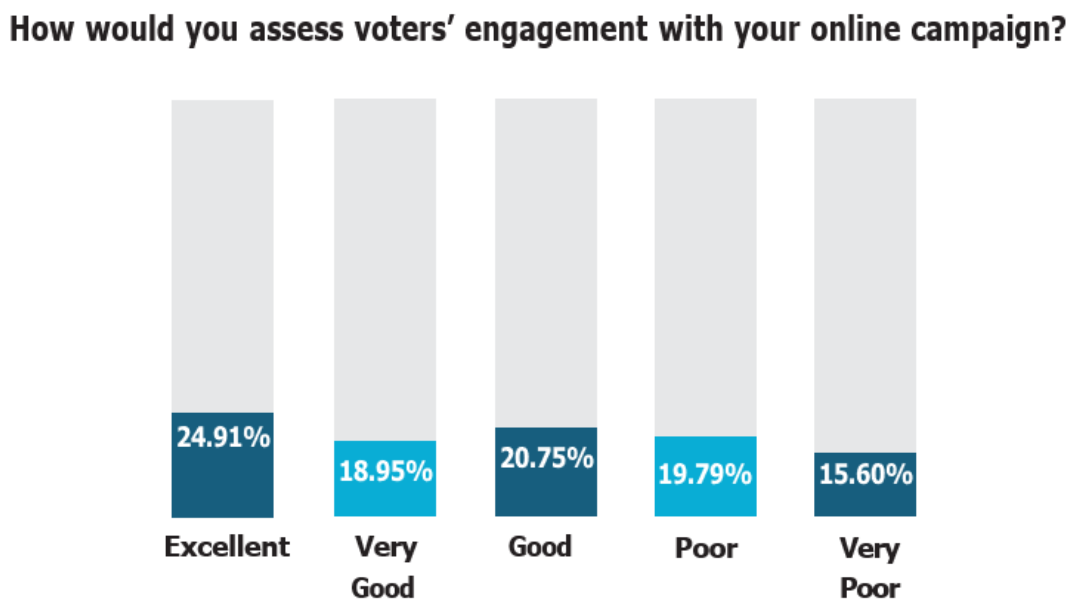
Some lists exclusively featured female candidates, these are: Al-Ittifaq List in Ajloun Governorate (three candidates), Nashmiat Al-Balqa List in Balqa Governorate (seven candidates), and Al-Himma List in Tafila Governorate (one candidate). It is worth noting that in 152 lists, constituting 88.37% of the total lists, included only one female candidate each.

The study deployed an 18-person research team across 17 electoral districts. Monitoring the Facebook pages of 167 female candidates in the period between August 1 and September 12, 2024. About 55% of the female candidates belonged to a political party, and 71% of them were running for the first time. Facebook emerged as the most popular platform, used by 68.33% of female candidates. A small percentage (0.83%) did not use any social media platforms for their campaigns. The report monitored candidates' social media pages, analyzing over 3,427 posts and 141,934 comments to evaluate the nature of interactions with their campaigns and the specific challenges women faced in the digital sphere.

Key Findings from Data Analysis



Regarding voter engagement with female candidates' online campaigns during the 2024 parliamentary elections, 24.91% of the candidates reported excellent engagement, while 35.39% indicated that engagement was poor or very poor. This data is summarized in the diagram below:



What Online Abuse Looked Like

Social media emerged as a primary platform for electoral violence against women. Candidates were subjected to organized smear campaigns, including spreading false rumours, direct bullying about their appearance, or attacks on their social backgrounds. Only a few candidates effectively responded to these negative interactions, underscoring the need for training on combating digital harassment.

Among the monitored reactions on the Facebook accounts, 39,958 comments, approximately 28.15% on female candidates' social media pages were abusive. These included bullying based on appearance, questioning their qualifications, and harsh criticism related to their social or political backgrounds. These attacks negatively impacted their electoral campaigns. Offenses included comments intended to humiliate the candidates by diminishing their capabilities, making judgments based on gender, appearance, and political affiliations.

In response to these negative comments, a total of 1,648 replies (4.12% of all comments) were posted by page administrators or followers, often characterized by positivity and an attempt to de-escalate the negative discourse.

Digital abuse came in several forms:

- **Gendered Insults:** "She's just a quota," "She should stay at home."
- **Moral Defamation:** Accusations questioning women's honour and intentions
- **Mockery and Ridicule:** Comments targeting appearance, dress, and voice
- **Misinformation:** Fake claims of corruption or foreign agendas
- **Cyberbullying:** Coordinated trolling, impersonation, and harassment

This abuse was not evenly distributed. Candidates from all-women or reformist lists such as *Nashmiat Al-Balqa* faced higher rates of abuse, with peaks during debates and major announcements. Several female candidates faced online campaigns aimed at discrediting them, including the creation of fake social media accounts and the spreading of defamatory rumours. A candidate from Zarqa reported that someone impersonated her on social media to organize events under her name. Another candidate

from Mafraq experienced online bullying from competitors, adding further pressure to her campaign. Cyber violence, including online defamation, is a dangerous form of electoral violence that can severely damage a candidate's reputation and impede her ability to effectively communicate with voters.

Typology of Gendered and Political Violence Against Female Candidates

This typology outlines the intersecting forms of violence that women candidates face in electoral processes. These acts are not isolated; they serve to reinforce gender hierarchies, regulate women's political participation, and uphold patriarchal control. Categorizing these experiences helps us understand the specific barriers women face and work toward equitable political systems.

1. Verbal Harassment and Gender Stereotyping

Label: Sexist Verbal Abuse / Gender Role Enforcement

Explicitly sexist remarks and verbal attacks seek to undermine women's presence in politics by invoking patriarchal norms of femininity and domesticity.

Examples:

- *"Go back to your home; a woman's voice is shameful."*
- *"Stay in the kitchen."*
- *"You're of no use."*

Consequences: Normalizes exclusion, deters participation, and reinforces gender stereotypes.

2. Delegitimization and Symbolic Violence

Label: Legitimacy Attacks and Tokenism

Women candidates are portrayed as unqualified or symbolic, present only to fulfil quotas. Their candidacy is framed as artificial or unserious.

Examples:

- Labelled as "fillers" added for electoral compliance.
- Mockery of all-women lists as abnormal or doomed.

Consequences: Erodes public trust, reduces chances of election, deters long-term political engagement.

3. Appearance Policing and Objectification

Label: Gendered Aesthetic Control

Focus on how women dress or look is used to shame or discredit them, either through moral judgment or sexualization, often against cultural or religious standards.

Examples:

- Criticizing attire as immodest or improper.
- Mocking headscarf styles or lack thereof.
- Flirtatious messages that trivialize political roles.

Consequences: Shifts focus from qualifications to looks, restricts freedom of expression, and creates discomfort or withdrawal from public spaces.

4. Familial and Communal Coercion

Label: Family and Tribal Pressure / Collective Control

Women are pressured by family or tribal networks to abandon candidacy, sometimes through public shaming or threats to relationships and status.

Examples:

- Threats of disownment or social backlash.
- Public criticism by relatives.

Consequences: Forces a choice between political life and family belonging, leading many to withdraw under duress.

5. Partisan and Ideological Harassment

Label: Political Identity Policing

Women are targeted for perceived inconsistencies between their personal attributes and party ideologies, or dismissed based on gendered assumptions about their political value.

Examples:

- *"What have you women done for the country?"*
- Criticism for dressing contrary to party norms.

Consequences: Undermines credibility within political circles and reduces intra-party support.

6. Credential-Based Undermining

Label: Educational and Professional Discrediting

Women's qualifications are mocked or questioned disproportionately, especially achievements that would be accepted in male counterparts.

Example:

- Dismissing honorary degrees or professional accolades.

Consequences: Reinforces gendered notions of incompetence and deters qualified women from candidacy.

7. Psychological Violence and Withdrawal Pressure

Label: Emotional Manipulation and Discouragement

Fear-inducing remarks, emotional pressure, and discouragement are used to exhaust or demoralize women, pushing them out of races.

Examples:

- *"Elections are a headache—you don't need this."*
- *"You can't compete with the big sharks."*

Consequences: Induces anxiety and burnout, leading to premature withdrawal.

8. Ethno-Regional Discrimination

Label: Identity-Based Exclusion

Women are disqualified in public discourse based on ethnic, regional, or tribal identity, with claims that they are culturally or geographically unfit to run.

Examples:

- Accusations of violating tribal norms.
- Claims of not being "from the area."

Consequences: Marginalizes minority women, limits representation, and preserves exclusionary political systems.

9. Reputational Targeting Through Family

Label: Indirect Harassment and Character Assassination

Attacks on the reputations of candidates' family members aim to discredit them indirectly, using guilt by association or moral shaming.

Example:

- Defamatory posts about a candidate's spouse or relatives.

Consequences: Increases emotional strain, endangers loved ones' privacy, and pressures women to exit public life.

Who Was Behind the Abuse—and When It Struck

The attacks that female candidates faced online during Jordan's 2024 parliamentary elections didn't arise from a vacuum. They came from identifiable, layered sources, each shaped by their own motivations and methods.

First, there were the local constituents—ordinary Facebook users, often posting under their real names, whose comments reflected deeply rooted cultural and patriarchal beliefs. For many of these users, a woman stepping into the public eye was already a provocation. Their posts weren't critiques of policies or platforms—they were judgments on character, dress, and family roles. "She should stay home," "Why isn't she married?", "This is shameful," were all too common refrains. These weren't political debates. They were social punishments. And in the context of an election, they became tools of exclusion. Moreover, female candidates were often judged based on their physical appearance rather than their policies or ideas. Comments ranged from mocking their attire to making inappropriate or sexualized remarks; She should focus on looking good, not politics." And "Is this a beauty contest or an election?"

Then came the rival political supporters. These weren't random commenters, but actors engaged in the electoral competition itself. Instead of engaging in issue-based rebuttals, they turned to gendered attacks—spreading false rumours, questioning credibility, and even targeting a candidate's followers. The intent was clear: discredit, distract, and destabilize. Misogyny wasn't just a bias; it was weaponized as a campaign tactic. And it worked, not only to delegitimize the women it targeted, but to signal to the broader public that they didn't belong in politics.

It was interesting to note that some female candidates faced family or tribal pressures via social media, including attempts to persuade them to withdraw or question their ability to win. A candidate from Karak reported that family members posted negative comments online, even threatening to disown her if she continued her campaign. Similarly, a candidate from Zarqa reported receiving comments designed to erode her confidence and question her electoral prospects.

The most calculated abuse, however, came from coordinated online campaigns. These were the most difficult to trace, yet the most damaging in their impact. Copy-paste smear messages, fake profiles, and orchestrated misinformation flooded comment sections at strategic times. These weren't spontaneous expressions of anger—they were digital ambushes. Behind them were likely networks of accounts aligned with powerful interests threatened by the prospect of women gaining ground. These attacks weren't just disruptive; they were designed to erase female candidates from the digital arena altogether.

The Clockwork of Abuse: When It Hit Hardest

What made this digital violence even more insidious was its timing. It wasn't random. It was reactive, and precisely targeted.

Whenever female candidates appeared in televised debates, the abuse would spike—within minutes, sometimes seconds. Visibility was met with vitriol. And it wasn't policy positions that were attacked—it was how they spoke, what they wore, how they smiled. Debates became not only political events but cultural battlegrounds, where women were judged more for their appearance than their arguments.

In the final five days before voting, the volume of abuse soared. This wasn't unique to Jordan—it's part of a global pattern. As the stakes get higher, so do the attacks. This last-minute flood of harassment

aims to shake confidence, derail momentum, and drive candidates into silence just when their voices matter most.

Abuse also flared after positive moments—an endorsement, a viral campaign video, or a well-received speech. These high points in a candidate's trajectory became triggers for backlash. In effect, women were punished not for failing—but for succeeding. This reveals a deeper truth: digital actors were not just reacting emotionally; they were enforcing boundaries. When women gained political legitimacy, they were deliberately pulled back.

The Bigger Picture: Abuse as a Political Tool

What emerges from this data and testimony is a clear and troubling pattern: digital violence was instrumentalized. It was not merely emotional outbursts or cultural inertia—it was a strategic extension of the political contest itself.

The online space became an electoral battlefield, where gendered attacks were as influential as policy debates. Misogyny became a way to narrow the field—not by winning more votes, but by forcing opponents to retreat.

Many of the comments were designed as incitement to withdraw from the elections; Several female candidates reported receiving discouraging comments designed to persuade them to abandon their campaigns. A candidate from the Second Capital District shared comments such as, "Elections are a headache," and, "You can't compete with the big sharks." Another candidate from Zarqa received messages meant to demoralize her and pressure her to withdraw.

Reactions and Candidate Voices: Field Testimonies

Social media emerged as a primary platform for electoral violence against women. Candidates were subjected to organized smear campaigns, including spreading false rumors, direct bullying about their appearance, or attacks on their social backgrounds. Only a few candidates effectively responded to these negative interactions, underscoring the need for training on combating digital harassment.

These experiences underline the significant challenges women face in politics, where harassment often targets not only their political abilities but also their personal and family lives. Female candidates need greater societal support, legislative measures to criminalize online harassment, and awareness campaigns to ensure their right to participate equitably and safely in political activities.

The monitoring highlighted that negative comments had a significant psychological and professional impact on female candidates online presence, including moderating comments and addressing false claims. This additional burden often detracted from their ability to focus on their electoral campaigns.

Some candidates chose to respond to the harassment directly, aiming to clarify misconceptions and defend their positions, while others preferred to ignore or block offensive users to avoid further conflict. However, for many, the persistent negativity on social media platforms created a hostile environment that amplified the challenges they faced in an already competitive electoral process.

The increasing prevalence of online harassment during electoral campaigns reflects broader societal attitudes that seek to undermine women's political participation. Tackling this issue requires a multifaceted approach involving legal reform, public awareness, and institutional support to foster a safe and inclusive digital space for all candidates. Addressing these challenges effectively will empower

women to engage confidently in the political process, free from fear of intimidation or discrimination. In interviews, candidates described how abuse shaped their campaigns:

"Even people from my own [political party's] list would say,
'You're just a woman. You're here for decoration.' "

"They created fake accounts to mimic me, spread lies, and scare my followers."

"It wasn't politics anymore. It was psychological warfare."

Structural Factors Driving Digital Abuse

While the monitoring did not reveal significant differences in terms of women's experience of online abuse based on their political party, region or religious affiliation, there were structural factors that were witnessed across the board. Online abuse became a tool of discreditation, used to undermine women's legitimacy as political actors. Instead of debating ideas, abusers focused on delegitimizing women's presence altogether—casting them as unqualified, immoral, or irrelevant. By attacking their character, background, and even their appearance, digital aggressors sent a message to the public: these women do not belong in power.

But it wasn't only about candidates already in the race. The vitriol was also aimed at future contenders. By flooding the public sphere with threats, mockery, and defamation, digital violence functioned as a warning signal—a barrier to entry meant to discourage women from ever stepping forward. It was a method of pre-emptive exclusion, reinforcing the idea that the cost of political participation was too high for women to bear.

This strategy also served a broader purpose: preserving patriarchal control over electoral legitimacy. Elections, in this context, were not just contests of policy or vision—they were battlegrounds over who has the right to represent. Women who defied the status quo were treated not just as competitors, but as disruptors of a system that still values tribal loyalty and male authority over inclusive governance.

The attacks were particularly fierce against women running in the general electoral district, where the absence of tribal affiliations left them more exposed. Without the informal protection offered by local networks—networks that often shield their own from public shaming—these candidates stood alone. They were more visible, but less defended. And in politics, visibility without protection is often a liability.

What made these women even more vulnerable was the nature of their campaigns. Those who challenged social norms—by heading electoral lists, speaking openly about gender justice, or rejecting traditional dress codes—faced the harshest backlash. Their campaigns weren't just political; they were symbolic. They represented a different future, one that threatened deeply entrenched power structures. The attacks they faced weren't just personal—they were political reassertions of control.

In essence, digital abuse became the frontline for gatekeeping Jordan's political space. It was not simply harassment—it was strategic suppression. Understanding this dynamic is crucial. It demands that we move beyond condemning online abuse as bad behaviour and start treating it as what it is: a systemic barrier to gender equity in democracy.

Conclusion and Recommendations: From Monitoring to Prevention

The social media attacks on the female candidates weren't just about individuals. They were about systems of control. Structural sexism was enacted not only through institutions, but through platforms, algorithms, and digital echo chambers.

Understanding these patterns is not just an academic exercise. It is essential groundwork for building protections ahead of the 2026 elections. Without intervention—from electoral commissions, political parties, civil society, and tech platforms—Jordan risks another election where women's political engagement is not just discouraged but digitally dismantled.

To protect digital spaces and democratic integrity ahead of 2026:

1. Electoral Commission:

- Expand legal definitions of electoral violence to include digital abuse
- Establish complaint and redress mechanisms for female candidates

2. Political Parties:

- Provide digital safety and crisis response training
- Sanction internal actors who participate in or ignore abuse

3. Civil Society and Media:

- Launch counter-speech and solidarity campaigns
- Promote ethical coverage of female candidates
- Train activists and youth to recognize and counter online hate

4. Tech Platforms:

- Improve reporting tools in Arabic
- Collaborate with local CSOs to identify coordinated attacks

The digital violence faced by women in Jordan's 2024 elections cannot be dismissed as the cost of political life. It is a systematic barrier to representation and must be treated as such. As Jordan moves toward its next elections in 2026, the time to act is now.

Silencing women with a click is easy. Protecting their voice requires more. But it is essential if democracy is to be real, inclusive, and just.