



Article

Sexualization and Dehumanization of Women by Social Media Users in Namibia

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Abstract: The advancements in current sources of information and technology have resulted in our ‘real lives’ becoming inundated with and entangled with new media and ‘virtual’ environments. Social media promotes freedom of expression, and remains a largely unregulated interactive space, despite the various monitoring mechanisms introduced by social platform hosts and owners to control hate speech and other forms of abuse. It is becoming increasingly evident that the protection of anonymity on social media platforms promotes the proliferation of new forms of misogyny and offensive language directed towards women and individuals belonging to marginalised groups. This proliferation of online misogynistic hate speech ultimately exhibits oppressing mechanisms that aim to disempower, dehumanise and perpetuate gender-based violence against women. This paper discusses the results of exploring the use of dehumanising and abusive language expressed online, that targets prominent Namibian women in politics and business. The feminist theory, especially sexualization and objectification framework was employed to conceptually analyse depictions of dehumanisation of women in Namibia. Narratives from social media, such as Facebook and Twitter of public figures of Namibian women, were presented to justify cases of insulting and derogatory language. They expose the implications of sexualisation and dehumanisation of women’s human rights and freedom to participate actively in both public and social media spaces, and its potential to perpetuate gender-based violence in Namibia. The paper argues that contemporary social media has failed to create a conducive environment for critical and meaningful participation, which is free from sexualization, genderisation and dehumanisation, providing recommendations for the Namibian environment.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, there have been burgeoning concerns about the proliferation of gendered/sexualised behaviours as expressed on social media platforms, directed at many prominent women who participated in public discourse. This shows that violence against women knows no boundaries and remains a pervasive and global phenomenon affecting both high and low- and middle-income countries [1]. The latest World Health Organisation (WHO) report on violence against women [2], indicates that in 2018, globally, on average 736 million, that is one in every three women, has been beaten, coerced into sex or abused. More worrisome is the emerging data and reports [3] that indicate an increase in abuse, harassment and aggression against women or more in general gender-based violence (GBV) that has increased in the COVID-19 pandemic years, in both real lives and virtual online spaces [4].

Several studies found that the abuse of women in general, and sexual harassment in particular, is widespread in the online world. This abuse and harassment include comments

intended to silence or censor women, thereby infringing their freedom of expression. Of concern is the real threat that these online threats progress to expressions of physical violence or sexual assault in the real world, as reported by Amnesty International [5].

Sadly, within a predominantly patriarchal society, the existing legal structures and the cultural and traditional systems, do not adequately harness the gendered/sexualised behaviours in the society; and this lack of gender sensitivity is replicated within social media. Galobart [6] (para 10) asserts that the cyberbullying of women and marginalised individuals “has spread alarmingly on the Internet, particularly on social media, which are after all a reflection of what already exists in society”. Galobart’s words are confirmed by The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) in its 2020’s study on measuring the prevalence of on-line violence against women [7]. The study, covering the top fifty-one world countries by a number of people online, indicates that 85% of women online, have either been a victim of violence, or were aware of forms of online harassment, that occurred to other women, (Table 1).

Table 1. Online prevalence rate by regions (2020).

World Regions	On-Line Violence % Rate
North America	74
Europe	76
Latin America and Caribbean	91
Africa	90
Middle East	98
Asia	88
Total	85

Source: Authors’ elaboration from [7].

Specifically younger women are more likely to have personally experienced online violence. The data shows that globally, 45% of Generation Z and Millennials, and 31% of Generation X and Baby Boomers, have felt threatened on social media [7].

Sexist or misogynistic on-line abuse includes offensive, insulting or abusive language, intended to shame, intimidate, belittle or degrade women on the basis of negative and harmful stereotypes [5]. Although not directly addressed as a research question in the paper, it is worth mentioning that such abuses are similarly experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBTB+) and all those individuals who do not fit into a binary gender category [8,9]. This fact clearly emerged in a survey conducted by Brandwatch and Ditch the Label where over a 3½ year period between 2016 and 2019, 10 million online posts were analysed from the major social media, (Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube among others) to explore online transphobia in the USA and the UK; 1.5 million transphobic comments were identified concerning trans people [10] (Haynes, 2019). Online users also experienced intersecting forms of abuse [11,12].

In Namibia, with the current population of 2.6 million, 1.2 million use the internet, while 31.2% are social media users [13]. In this paper, using the depictions of women’s public figures in social media, we explore the following key research question: How are Namibian women’s public figures portrayed in social media? We followed a hybrid methodological approach, which combined literature to evaluate the state of knowledge on GBV online and qualitative assessment of GBV in Namibia by looking at Facebook/Twitter comments posted on the accounts of relevant females. In particular, five accounts have been identified and scrutinised over the period of two months focusing on specific misogynist words and themes. We used sentiment analysis to investigate the degree of sexualised and gendered based violence in the social media comments through the inclusion of derogatory adjectives that reinforce traditional feminine norms and stereotypes [14].

The paper is organised as follows: after the introduction, Section 2 provides a literature review of current feminist theories used as a lens to unearth sexualisation and objectification of women public figures on the social media platforms in Namibia. Two subsections deal with African feminism, and the history of feminism in Namibia. Section 3 introduces the impact of the internet revolution on gender violence online, while Section 4 describes the

methodology. Section 5 presents and discusses the findings, and analyses the narratives extracted from the empirical cases; conclusions and recommendations complete the paper.

2. A Feminist Theoretical Framework

The use of feminist theory improves our understanding of sexualisation and dehumanisation practices employed to silence and discredit/devalue Namibian women in public space. The term feminism has its root in '*femme*' a French word to mean women and '*ism*' as representing a belief system [15], many schools of philosophical thought, theories, and moral principles. Malinowska [16] states that feminism has been employed to mobilise ideas and actions in alleviating women's subjugated positions, private and social alike, by exerting an impact on the economic, political, and cultural fabrics of modern societies. Other scholars [17,18] state that feminism has been evident and evoked by historical activities of women's movements worldwide since the 18th century, where women from different nations (especially the USA) demanded their rights to public practices (such as the right to vote).

Though feminism strives to interrogate issues affecting women both globally and regionally, in Africa, particularly in Namibia, no sole meaning has been achieved. Hence, various scholars associate feminism with different contexts, namely, as a consciousness, as an activity or set of activities, secured in the problems of inequality and unfairness in the treatment of women [19–21]. Like other scholars, Norwood [22] sees feminism as an approach to breaking down and deconstructing genderised and sexist ideologies that silence, discredit and dehumanise women. With such a variant meaning, we believe that feminism theory continues to address and explore what constitutes injustices and what approaches can be employed in promoting social justice for women in public space, in this case, women in Namibia's social media.

2.1. *White Feminism vs. African Feminism*

The concept of white feminism particularly in the US, emerges during the historical struggle by white women who fought for equal wage between white women and men, without recognising that Latin/black/women of colour's wages at the time was not even close to white women's wage [23]. This is because, feminism traditionally focused on (white) women's experiences, yet when sex and gender are combined with race [24], white feminism tends to lose its progressive edge. The assumption within this first wave feminism is the way white women experience misogyny (prejudice, sexism, chauvinism, police discrimination) is not the same way Black women or women of colour experience it. As such, white feminism failed to recognise Black women's specific experiences of violence and misogyny, which indeed is a feminist issue, even if, generally it does not affect white women. Thus, questioning white feminists does not reject their voices, but rather demands recognition of diverse voices beyond the known and status quo [25,26]. This brings us to the idea of African/Black feminism, which is not monolithic, but fluid in its nature, rooted in activism, complex, and constantly shifting [27]. African feminism mainly echoes from the idea that traditional Western feminism does not fully represent all women; various studies were cynical of the kind of feminism flavour championed by some Western scholars, which lacks black women's experience [28,29]. This new African approach differs from the Western forms of feminism, frequently connected to the history of the struggle for women's access and right to vote [30] and focuses more on African women's specific cultural and historical location within the postcolonial context, and their responses to shifting conditions.

Within the African historical context, specifically in countries that endured apartheid and colonial systems, such as Namibia, women organised themselves to fight against denied access to formal education and training, and for economic empowerment, and political representation [31]. Their demand for a voice can be traced from different generations and realms, which led to the conceptualisation of what it means to be an African and Namibian feminist. Many African scholars believe that feminists based in the West have

been patronising towards their sisters in Africa, Mikell [28] (p. 4), clarified that “*African Feminism... has largely been shaped by African women’s resistance to western hegemony and its legacy within African. Culture*” According to Mohanty [29], there is some justification for the criticism because of the legacy of colonialism women from low- and middle-income countries are the most exploited people in the world. The effects of colonial policies and institutions have been a big influence in shaping unequal patriarchal gender norms and gender power relations patriarchies and hegemonizing middle-classed cultures in colonized areas. In the process of building colonial rule, many racial, sexual and class power hierarchies were constructed. Apart from the struggle for women’s rights to vote at the global level, women in Africa have been demanding a space within public life and contributions to society in different ways. In most African countries, women’s participation in the feminist struggle was primarily about racial equality, which appeared as an issue among Western feminists only later in the twentieth century.

2.2. Feminism in Namibia

Women’s struggle for a voice, rights and recognition in Namibia started in the pre-colonial period. Ambunda and de Klerk [32] (pp. 52–53) stated that, in traditional African societies, just like Namibia, a woman’s gender identity is “*influenced by a deeply entrenched tradition of patriarchy, which is seen as a social organisation in which the father or eldest male is the head of the family*”. As a result, culture heavily influences the way in which women in Namibia are treated and how their contributions are valued in public discourse. Within this arrangement, women are treated as inferior, immature and demoted to the status of children, thus, deprived of their rights to own property, contribute to decision making processes and exercising their capacities as equal human beings [33].

Women’s battles against patriarchy continued throughout the colonial and post-colonial epochs. During the colonial period, in the early 1950s, Namibian women, just like their counterparts in other African countries, played a significant role in the struggle against the racial forces of apartheid and colonialism [28]. Various women activists have narrated their struggle to participate in the armed struggle for national liberation within the South West Africa People’s Organisation (SWAPO) thereby highlighting the recognition of their activism and lobbying that resulted in the inclusion of the principle of gender equality within the 1990 Namibian Constitution.

Various women in Namibia have been writing about their struggle to participate in their own right, and not to support men, in the Namibian struggle for independence [33,34]. Shilongo [34] states that, one of the women’s movements in Namibia around the 1950’s took place in Windhoek, the Capital City. This movement was formed as a result of the experiences of a group of women who moved from rural areas in search of work in the city. Job opportunities at the time, though, were scarce, and thus many of these women either found work as domestic workers, whilst others made their own jobs by brewing and selling beer. What is significant about the actions of these women, is that at the time, unlike their black male counterparts, black women were not allowed to leave their rural areas in search of employment opportunities in towns. Yet, defiantly, some of these women moved to towns and cities, namely Windhoek, to settle in the Old Location (Old Location refers to what had been the South West African capital’s main location for the majority of black and so-called Colored people from the early 20th century until 1960. The Old Location since became a synonym for African unity in the face of the divisions imposed by apartheid [35].), a community with a mixture of diverse ethnic groups, and dynamic economic interaction with the whites. At the time, the Windhoek Municipality was controlled by the South African apartheid government and typical of this government’s notion of separate development through the Group Areas Act, this government sought to demolish the Old Location and build a new township on the outskirts of Windhoek. This is when a group of women joined the first protest against relocation from the areas to an outskirt township.

A *second women's* protest took place on the 8 December 1959, when a group of women boycotted the Beer Hall run by the Municipality and demanded the release of the 1000 women involved in protests against the community's removal from the Old Location by the municipality [34]. On the 10 December the same year, the police opened fire on a crowd and killed thirteen people, including one woman leader, Anna Kakurukaze Mungunda. This incident was a turning point for women's role in the Namibian resistance movement, as their activism created prominent women leaders in the organisation's resistance against the South African occupation of Namibia. This second women's protest also encouraged more women to join the struggle, both inside the country and in exile. Various women in Namibia have been writing about their wrestle to participate in the struggle for independence [36].

Shilongo [34] also provides accounts of the many ways that women struggled to contribute to the liberation war, decision making processes and leadership in public discourses, although the hierarchy of the liberation movements remained male-dominated [37]. Women also took steps to support boycotts and sustained their children's protests for the South African military bases to be removed from nearby schools, churches and public places [32] and became highly active in local organisations that responded to the daily needs affecting the communities. Churches and ecumenical structures such as the Women's desk of the Council of Churches in Namibia, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Namibia Women's Voice, were the front runners in the fight for women's rights [38].

The above depicts how women in Namibia not only contributed to the liberation struggle but asserted their voices in public discourses during the pre and colonial epochs. It is also worth mentioning that women's struggle transcended the pre- and colonial eras into the post-colonial democratic Namibia. Upon independence, in 1990, the Constitution of the Republic of Namibia proclaimed that, "*...all persons shall be equal before the law. No persons may be discriminated against on the grounds of sex, race, colour [color] ethnic origin, religion, creed ... (Namibian Constitution Third Amendment Act 8 of 2014 (GG 5589). This amending Act came into force on its date of publication 13 October 2014.)*." This resulted in a high number of women assuming leadership positions both within government and the private sector. Namibia being a signatory to the UN, the government introduced numerous laws to accelerate women's participation in decision making processes. For instance, in 1998, an Affirmative Action Policy (Act No. 29) was introduced with the aim 'to ensure that persons in the designated groups enjoy equal employment opportunities at all levels of employment and are equitably represented in the workforce of a relevant employer' (Affirmative Action (Employment) Amendment Act 6 of 2007). This means that, all persons, including women, can occupy a position of employment, enjoy the same rights and privileges as citizens and can freely express their views in public discourses (social media).

In this post-colonial period, however, women continued to wrestle for their rights and access to resources, namely, land rights and entry to traditional male-dominated areas of specialisation such as the mining industry. The challenge remains to ensure that constitutional objectives and legislative promises of gender equality become embedded within society, where Namibian women can effectively claim their rights. Supporting African feminism in Namibia, Biwa [39], in a study on the role women play and/or should play in the mining sector (The Namibian economy is heavily dependent on the primary sector, principally on the extraction and processing of minerals for export [40]. The Mining sector is a male-dominated industry where women represent only a small segment of those employed in the industry.), this affirms that women should be regarded as activists, hard workers, negotiators, and ultimately, they should be aligned with men. She proposes a co-constructed, conciliatory, and collaborative symbolic action between men and women to achieve gender equality. For her, this approach has the potential to dislocate and denaturalize the taken-for-granted assumptions espoused by certain forms of Western feminisms, which assume that feminist symbolic action requires antagonism and competition between women and men in the field of mining.

On the other hand, although, historically, Namibian women made contributions to Namibia's liberation, the patriarchal culture has fostered gender imbalances embedded in political, economic, and social structures. Mwetulundila and Indongo [41] affirm that power relations between men and women, both in the pre- and post-colonialism reinforce the systemic disadvantage and oppression of women. In addition, women's relegation to the home and reproductive labor, limited their access to education, training, and resources. There is a likelihood that the participation of Namibian women in general, and black women specifically, could be undermined in public discourses, such as social media. Thus, in this paper, we foreground our analysis of African feminism theory to exhibit how Namibian women's voices and presence are viewed in social media.

2.3. *The State of Gender-Based Violence in Namibia*

The concept of gender-based violence (GBV) has been integrated into the legislative system of the Republic of Namibia. In line with the international definition, GBV is defined as all sorts of "... acts perpetrated against women, men, girls and boys on the basis of their sex,... which causes or could cause physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or economic harm...", [42] (p. 53). The Namibian central government has supported the establishment and strengthening of several national and regional institutions/agencies as well as public and private service providers.

The first National Gender Policy (1997) indicated that all acts of violence against women and children infringe Article 8 of the Namibian Constitution. The subsequent Namibian National Gender Policy 2010–2020, replaced the term "*violence against women and children*" with the more comprehensive term "*gender-based violence*" [42].

It is however difficult to obtain officially updated and detailed disaggregated statistics on GBV in the country. Furthermore, the data available mostly report rape, (perceived as the prominent form of GBV), attempted rape and bodily harm assault.

In order to tackle and decrease GBV, particularly intimate partner violence, the central government supported the establishment and strengthening of several national and regional institutions/agencies as well as public and private service providers. Institutions, agencies and service providers (Regain Trust, FLON, UN Women Namibia, Legal Assistance Centre, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, -FES, just to mention a few.), which have played a major part in supporting survivors of abuse, detecting (and sometimes preventing) GBV cases. Over the years these institutions and bodies have made various efforts to condemn GBV and have been undoubtedly mostly successful in proving assistance to the victims of GBV [43]. There is, however, the impression that the focus has been more on the effects rather than on the root causes of GBV, which continues to grow, slowly reaching endemic proportions [44]. Collected evidence from recent years indicates, in fact, that GBV has increased in Namibia over the last decades [45,46]. As indicated by Venditto et al. [44] in the period between 2015–2019, there had been 11,300 gender-based crimes, on average nearly 5000 women and young girls were abused yearly; 78% of the victims were raped. GBV has emerged as a prime threat to social cohesion in the country. Sadly, gendered online harassment and threats of sexual violence on social media can have a detrimental impact on the victim's emotional and mental health and furthermore result in prejudice and feelings of inferiority, exclusion, and victimisation [47].

Despite very progressive policies and legal frameworks on gender equality and gender-based violence, such as the Married Persons Equality Act (1996), the Combating of Domestic Violence Act (2003) and the Combating of Rape Act (2000), the Namibian government is falling to adequately address the endemic gender-based violence against women [48]. Therefore, an understanding of how best to tackle the issues of GBV in the Namibian context is eminent by strengthening the gender-wise approaches to the justice system to safeguard the safety of Namibian women.

However, these efforts to entrench the principle of gender equality in Namibia through legislative changes, have not effectively been replicated in online spaces. Currently, there is a lack of specific policies and regulations to educate, guide public discourses through social

media and prevent gender abuse, due to a scarce level of understanding, and knowledge on GBV online. Sadly, gendered online harassment and threats of sexual violence on social media can have a detrimental impact on the victim's emotional and mental health and also result in prejudice and feelings of inferiority, exclusion, and victimisation [47]. This paper tries to fill this gap by offering a new insight and harnessing the disproportionate levels of gender-based violence experienced by women in virtual spaces.

3. Women and the Internet's Use

This section describes women's presence on social media and how these platforms may be used to weaken women by positioning them as objects of violence. The ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators database shows that between 2010 and 2021, the number of people using the Internet more than doubled, from 2 billion to 4.95 billion [49]. This figure is equal to 58.4 percent of the world's total population [50], and the participation of women in the online space has gradually increased and, with the exception of the Least Developing Countries, it represents a critical mass (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of individuals using the Internet, by sex (2020).

Geographic Areas	Total	Female	Male
World	59.1	56.5	61.7
Developed Countries	88.3	87.7	89.0
Developing Countries	53.3	50.1	56.5
Least Developed Countries	24.6	18.8	30.5
Land Locked Developing Countries	32.3	26.8	37.8
Small Island Developing States	60.6	59.4	61.2

Source: Authors' elaboration from [49].

Considering such movements, it can be said that the internet and social media alike is a playing field where women, just like male counterparts, participate actively and contribute meaningfully [51]. However, although there is a strong link between cyberspace and the political empowerment of women; cyberfeminism reminded us *"that there are differences in power between women and men specifically in the digital discourse"* [52] (p. 2). Numbers of feminist activists, in Namibia and elsewhere in the world, have been using the social media space to protest for women's safety, highlighting the problem of online harassment and women's vulnerability to online sexual predators [53,54]. In Namibia, the Namibian Chamber of the Internet Society has also stressed the lack of laws regulating online abuses and GBV on social media [55]. This is further compounded by limited societal awareness of how to make use of complaint mechanisms adopted by some social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

With the advancement of cyberspace, we contend that social media, which is a public space, ought to establish cyber related policies to guide engagements that are free from sexualization and dehumanization of women. Social media platforms, on the one hand, facilitates interaction among their users, yet on the other hand, it is also rapidly evolving into an increasingly hostile space for women [56], and a place where the centrality of male heterosexuality is reaffirmed through sexualisation of online forms of communication, [57].

Sexualisation generally occurs when an individual is reduced to their body parts or sexual functioning [58]. On the one hand, the experiences of discrimination and body objectification both start from a dehumanising perception of the target. Regrettably, these dynamics also target transgender and cisgender women as well as all gender diverse and non-binary people [59]. Continuous exposure to these experiences and media images reinforces the gender roles that see men as predators and women as prey; in this power dynamic, the bodies of women, just like the bodies of trans people, are relegated to be mere sexual objects for men. On the other hand, the globalisation of "communication" allows women to be more connected and mobilised. Utilising social media platforms as emerging public spaces to share stories and disseminate messages, women aim to deconstruct patri-

archal privilege, obtain reproductive justice, trans inclusion, sexual-minority rights, just to mention a few issues [50].

It is with this perspective that we proceed to unpack the issue of gender sexualization and dehumanization in Namibia's social media. This is because of Namibia's cultural context where patriarchy is to a certain degree normalised with a limited number of groups rejecting the phenomena, as in many other African countries.

Understanding Active Participation of Women in Namibia's Social Media

Social media has become an indispensable public space where citizens of the world ought to engage and participate freely, without fear of being ridiculed and demeaned. Although different studies portrayed a need for women to be recognised [60,61], less is said in Namibia about asserting their voices via social media as free and equal participants. Considering the voice of women, the notion of participation ought to surpass the genderising and sexualising behaviours that are demeaning, silencing and dehumanising women, to being equal participants in the leadership and public space, which is social media. Women, just like other participants, should be allowed to assert their voices freely without being ridiculed and sexualised, and exercise their democratic rights as equal participants. Kabeer's [62] idea that access to resources and participation in social media manifests empowerment can be linked to Namibian women's access to public engagements and discourses as equal citizens and participants. However, there are challenges of sexualisation women and girls and non-binary people, which often lead to dehumanising and discriminatory treatment, whether it is in the domain of sexual relations, or of unconscious ideology or beliefs, including in private and professional educational institutions, and within public discourse.

Using the context of Namibia, Ambunda and de Klerk [32] emphasise that the effects of culture cannot be easily erased because culture is strongly implanted within everyone. As a result, the influence of culture creates a dichotomy between how society perceives non-binary people and non-binary people's demands to freely express who they are, both online and in 'real life'. Namiseb [33] indicates that women struggle to make meaningful contributions, since decision making is related to power and the control of daily activities in Namibian society. The under-representation of women's contribution to public decision making can be linked to gender stereotyping and traditional beliefs and practices in respect of women's space in decision making platforms and in different communities [63]. Such ideology and practices effectively inhibit women both from actively participating in social media engagements and in public discourses that could cause further online violence.

Feminist theories suggest that hostility toward women arises within the maintenance of a patriarchal culture and its accompanying attitudes of sexism, misogyny, and objectification of women and, in return, preserves and reinforces the hegemony of dominant masculinity within society. It is worth arguing that the patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes on social media are ideally meant to make women invisible, silent, passive and unworthy of attention. These practices may have a negative impact on women's careers and may lead to their exclusion from occupying leadership positions.

Although the Namibian government made strides in including women in political positions through its zebra policy (50/50) representation in leadership positions [44], the literature indicated that Namibian women continue to struggle in contributing to decision making processes. Despite the gendered discriminatory behavior enacted in online spaces, currently few studies exist, and few regulations are in place to control and address such online abuses in Namibia.

This study seeks to fill this void by exploring the nature, type and context in which prominent and public women find themselves as targets of online gender-based violence in Namibia.

4. Research Methods and Procedures

Taking Namibia as the setting of this study, this research is part of a qualitative research project that assesses the degree of gender-based violence amongst prominent women active in public life. The Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) framework has complemented the literature review of feminism to explicate how social inequality, power abuse, discriminatory practices and stereotypes about women can lead to complex hierarchically gendered social arrangements that exclude and disempower women as a social group. The FCDA advocates a feminist paradigm of sociolinguistic inquiry to investigate the (re)production of gender hierarchy in the discursive realm with the goal of “social emancipation and transformation” [64]. For the purpose of the current study, FCDA provides a suitable instrument to analyze the discursive practice of gender-based violence and gender stereotypes that derive from patriarchal cultural practices on social media.

A qualitative sentiment analysis was used to investigate the extent and the degree of online gender-based violence in Namibia. As indicated by Pang and Lee [65], sentiment analysis is appropriate to study people’s opinions, views, evaluations, attitudes, and emotions derived from written expressions on social media platforms/sites such as reviews, forum discussions, blogs, micro-blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and social networks. On the other hand, qualitative research is best if one aims to advance more thoughts of the existence of any unknown event to get an accurate perception of things and describe situations that would not have been accurately interpreted by a quantitative study [66]. Rather, in this study, an inductive approach has been applied where the theory has been generated after data have been collected and analysed accordingly [67].

This research was conducted over a five month period from March to July 2022. Data collection was made through an analytical examination of Facebook and Twitter comments on women’s involvement/engagement in public life posted to the status of prominent females Namibians by their followers. The study did not aim to use a representative sample of all race groups, but rather to assess the degree of gender-based violence directed at selected Namibian public women on social media. The sample is made of a purposive account-driven data set of female public figures who share similar characteristics that fit the research theme. The following inclusion criteria were employed to identify the eligible participants of this study such as women who have experienced online gender-based violence; most attacked public figures; very active presence on the Internet and the social media, a high number of followers on Facebook and Twitter.

The selected participants were 3 prominent female politicians and 2 outspoken female entrepreneurs (Ms. Geingos, being the President’s wife, also plays a political role in Namibian public life.). Their ages ranged between 29 and 71 years, and they all came from the same ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The selected social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) were found to present constant engagements and expressions of different users daily. The comments were randomly selected from mostly male followers who predominantly had toxic comments.

Table 3 presents the profile of the five female accounts selected, additionally, comments from the public on the Namibian newspaper Facebook page, on women’s participation in public life have also been assessed.

The data collection process implied manually downloading and transcribing the comments for qualitative analysis, reporting the sources of the comment, whom the comment was targeting, and the type of abuse in the comment. Eighty-two Facebook posts and comments were taken from groups, pages and personal timelines of the five female public figures. This included both memes and written comments. During this process, the authors compiled a list of commonly used insults that employed negative concepts and stereotypes directed toward women.

Table 3. Profile of Namibian public figures observed on social media.

Participants	Role	Age	Profile Observed
1. Monica Geingos	First Lady & Entrepreneur	46	
2. Netumbo Nandi Ndeitwah	Minister & Dep. President SWAPO (South West Africa People Organisation—A national party leading Namibia.) Party	71	Facebook/Twitter
3. Saara Kuugogelwa Amadhila	Prime Minister	55	
4. Anna Nghipondoka	Minister of Education	66	
5. Miriam Kaxukwena	Model & Entrepreneur	29	
6. The Namibian	Newspaper		Facebook

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Gathering data directly from Twitter allowed us to collect tweets as they were published on the platform. In total over 50 tweets were identified, and the messages encompassed a broad variety of gendered derogatory language.

The data for this research were subsequently filtered to serve the objectives of the study on the basis of abusive and sexualized content presented in the discourse surrounding each of the participants. We began to sort out data through familiarization, discovering emerging themes and categories, interpreting and reporting on the data patterns and clustering them into manageable data. An initial set of codes was independently identified by the authors who later met several times to discuss potential themes, review their observations, and agree upon a set of generic codes.

This process led to the identification of focused/relevant codes selected via a lexical base, while a pragmatic analysis was used to extract the conceptual themes/categories, explaining the degree of sexualized and gender-based violence (see Table 4).

Table 4. Main focused codes and interpretative categories signifying sexualized gendered based violence.

Focused Codes *	Interpretative Categories/Themes
Need manpower No women can handle Capabilities Different Actions Ignorance of politics Bad leaders Kitchen End in tears Respect tradition	1—Gender and feminine stereotype
Testosterone Emotions/emotional beings Seducing Fake hairs Black ass Gold digger Slut Stupid/mentally flawed	2—Sexist and misogynist narratives
Shameless brat Prostitute Porn stars To be confused Promiscuous Generational curse	3—Derogatory, hate speech and threats

Table 4. Cont.

Focused Codes *	Interpretative Categories/Themes
Rubbish	4—Dehumanising metaphoric language
Dumbs	
Snake	
Pig	
Nincompoop	
Parasite	
Dog	

Source: Authors elaboration, * the list is not exhaustive of the codes identified.

In our analysis, all comments extracted from Facebook and Twitter are anonymized but not censored and they include graphic content, as well as spelling and grammar mistakes, which are to be attributed to their authors.

Four interpretative categories/themes were identified as follows:

1. Gender and feminine stereotypes.
2. Sexist and misogynist narratives.
3. Derogatory, hate speech and threats.
4. Dehumanising metaphoric language.

5. Findings and Discussions

In this section, we present and discuss the key findings on the extent and the degree of online gender-based violence in Namibia. For this analysis, we focused on themes/categories that related to sexualised gendered based violence and dehumanisation, leveraged against the participants of this study.

As the data show, grounds on which women have been abused on social media vary from political attacks, to attempt their exclusion from leadership roles constructed by trolls (A troll is a person who posts inflammatory, insincere, digressive, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community), as well as targeting their personal achievements.

Below we present the evidence of each form of gendered based violence enacted from social media.

5.1. Gender and Feminine Stereotypes

Gender and feminine stereotypes are societal oversimplifications or beliefs on how men and women should act typical of such stereotypes, are general characteristics such as assertiveness, leadership competence and emotional sensitivity used to define what men and females do or how they should behave [68,69]. Social media recreates and emphasises the social situations in which gendered stereotypes are established, and, in return, the perpetuation of stereotypes preserves and reinforces the social culture of sexism and dominant masculinity [70]. At an individual level, these stereotypes can be used to disempower and discredit women's dignity and tarnish the feminine qualities expected of them, as is evident from online comments to the public figures examined in this study. These comments describe women as perceived to lack the ability to deal with politics because they do not have the right qualities or because that is not the role they are supposed to play in society.

In this study, we observed the sheer volume of online gender-based stereotypes and prejudice directed at individual Namibian female politicians which are deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Some trolls' comments exemplify how gender bias continues to question the expertise and competence of Namibian women in politics, as indicated in the comments below that refer to both the proposed SWAPO female candidate for the Presidency and the Namibian First Lady:

“At this point in time and for the problems that Namibia has, no women can handle those, any testosterone candidate will have my vote”, which lead other commentators to say:

“... what a bad leader you are”; “A female leader again? Ache [No], I’m not supporting it. A woman is just a woman even her actions are always differ(ent) from a man”.

At an individual level, these stereotypes can be used to disempower and discredit women dignitaries and tarnish the feminine qualities expected of them [68] as is evident from online comments to the public figures examined.

“First lady stays out of politics, your place is in a kitchen ... if you want to be respected, so stay in your lane.”

“Women lead with emotions and that’s their downfall”, this comment is emphasized and shared by other similar comments, “True, they are emotional beings” “... women are so emotional and many of them their life is full complications”.

Interestingly, some women share this vision as it is apparent from the following post:

“I am a woman and I know how we are created. We get moody so easily and fast and on the other hand we have things that can delay us to do things on time like menstrual cycle each month, Pregnancy etc. And to be a President u must attend at least all events. How do u expect a woman to cope? And sometimes some meetings done behind closed doors. How will the husband feel and handle this? Noo man we must just accept that a woman cannot fit to be a President that’s all”.

This is echoed by male’s comments such as *“They should go home, they are mother and wives”* or *“If a female become president, it will show that Namibia has no men”.*

This comment is a representation of deeply internalised sexism and patriarchy [71,72] that consider a woman’s role as limited to that of childcare and being an obedient spouse. This is a clear hegemony of overarching masculinity of how the traits of women are being perceived to be typically opposite of those associated with masculinity [14].

5.2. Sexist and Misogynist Narratives

The second theme emphasises a steady drumbeat of misogynistic and blatantly sexist narratives directed at both female Namibian politicians and female entrepreneurs. In our analysis of comments to their social media posts, we observed how the aggressors employ deeply misogynistic and sexualised terms that convey toxic representations of women. We found different words in the messages that dehumanise, belittle, criticise and demean the victims in a significant and sizeable degree, as indicated in the comments below by a male commentator to a post by a prominent Namibian social entrepreneur:

“[they] Are all porn stars”, or “... sorry, I don’t need to chart with a gold digger like u, bye”.

We further observed that the content of the abuse, targeted at women on social media, is overwhelmingly deemed to be misogynistic or sexist in nature, and reinforces discriminatory patriarchal norms about what it ‘means to be a woman’ in Namibian society.

The women in this study were either sexualized for living up to the status of the ideal female or discredited for their powerful character and for being financially independent. Most of these misogynistic sentiments contains vulgarities and offensive adjectives that are meant to offend, discredit and humiliating women, such as: *“whore”, “slut”, “prostitute”* and *“bitch” “stupid/mentally flawed”, “immoral”, “unworthy of respect”.*

“Monica Geingos you are a snake, you should be the one who convinced that sugar daddy of yours to all these dirty work, ngwee uholike lela ochelete shikumbu shoshilai [you like money, stupid bitch]” or, “What an unworthy pathetic prostitute”.

These narratives also included, but were not limited to, words of general references to body parts such as, *“ugly ass, black ass, skeleton body,”* and *“buttock”,* (see Table 4). Other negative adjectives enacted in the data were *“disgusting, dumb, corrupt, crazy, hypocrite, pathetic, useless”.*

The use of degrading terms such as these by social media users, may cause a serious threat to harm and demean the victims, and consequently instilling fear and insecurity

in them [14]. This is evident in that most of the women whose profiles were monitored, opted not to respond to these misogynistic comments, except for one prominent woman politician. Thus, these online misogynistic practices can potentially result in individual victims' dehumanization and intimidation [73] and, discourage them to use their voices within the public domain, thereby effectively women. silencing their voices from being heard in the public domain.

5.3. Derogatory Speeches and Threats

There is no commonly agreed set of definitions encompassing all forms of cyber violence and hate speech online against women [74]. We have used the term derogatory/hate speech to identify the third category emerging from the comments, since in the end, those comments aim at reinforcing traditional and stereotyped gender norms [14]. A considerable number of derogatory and hate speeches on online sites directed at Namibian female politicians, and the female entrepreneur, can be described as discriminatory, prejudiced, and hateful, with some comments even going as far as to extend seriously harmful threats, death wishes, or wishing ill health upon these women.

Overall, the derogatory terms clearly represent a form of sexual objectification that can be considered a form of aggression and threat:

"She looks dumb . . . we are tired of dumb people, please"; "SWAPO ain't this stupid [smiles] madam nwabish [Misspelled for rubbish] cabbage will never be president Rwirwi [smiles]"; "Neitumbu is old in mind selfish, jealousy and careless", "fucking for money will cause your family generational curse".

This type of comment can cause unwanted harm in the form of denigration and dehumanisation [75].

5.4. Dehumanising Metaphoric Language

In our evaluation, we found specific words and phrases that involve s metaphorical language, where the personalities and characters of the women in question are equated to a nonhuman entity (e.g., *"you are a pig", "parasite", "she is a snake", "nincompoop"* etc., see Table 4), and violating her human dignity. A closer lexical analysis of the classified data reveals a patriarchal and sectarian mindset that targets women openly and on flimsy grounds by using sexualized and dehumanized language. The type of language is cruel and strips women from their human dignities.

"You like too much sex like a dog, you are not a human being."

"You are a parasite, fucking for money will cause your family generational curse".

5.5. Discussions

The 4 categories identified above indicate that online spaces, especially social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, have become a new medium through which cyber violence and hate speech is expressed, and where the perpetration of gender-based violence and patriarchy finds an opportunity to thrive particularly in the absence of regulatory mechanisms. Although the status of human rights with respect to equal rights in gender and sexuality has slightly improved over the years, discrimination against women in Namibia remains elusive because of social attitudes towards gender stratifications. This persisting discrimination creates an enabling environment online to subject prominent women to hate speech.

In our analysis, we observed a large volume of manifestations of online gender-based abuse against female public figures characterised by its use of explicit misogynistic and anti-equality language, deeply rooted in dominant gender stereotypes that discriminate against women. This view is supported by Hawthorne and Klein's [52] finding on cyberfeminism, in that there are differences in power between women and men in the digital discourse, where women encounter violence without any form of protection. One can concede that,

though the state emphasises women empowerment, without strong regulations and cybersecurity, marginalized groups will continue to be dehumanized on Namibia's social media platforms, with impunity by these perpetrators of online violence.

Unsurprisingly, some attacks are evident of the persisting gender bias present in current perceptions of the expertise of women in politics; these biased comments draw on stereotypes that women are 'too emotional' to be trusted with politics. As such, gender-based abuse online has negative implications for equal gender representation and freedom of speech in public and political debates. Sadly, online gender-based abuse seeks to disempower and silence the voices of women from public and political spaces and undermine any efforts of fighting against gender inequality in the public domain. Thus, despite the existing legal provisions that set out to guarantee gender equality in Namibia, this has not translated onto social media platforms, and as such patriarchy continues to thrive in Namibia, and a woman who decides to enter politics is not seen as in her place. Rather, the patriarchal norms about the suitable 'place for women' to be within the private sphere, as housewives, and not as political leaders in their own right within the public sphere. Effectively, such patriarchal norms serve to actively discourage and exclude women to exercise their power.

Namibian women though, are gradually taking up positions previously male dominated within the political space, in their quest to challenge the status quo, yet these women continue to be constantly subjected to the masculine/male gaze. Instead of considering female politicians as competent and intellectual beings, they are objectified and reduced to nothing more than their physical body parts. There is countless evidence of harassment, insults, hate, and threats of violence to ensure that women remain in subservient positions and roles. The adjectives '*stupid*' and '*crazy*' raise concerns that a woman is either not intelligent or is too irrational and emotional, hypocritical and old tradition (as compared to the rationality and intelligence of men). We find these words in a message that reinforces feminine stereotypes and inflate the negative sentiment of comments to a significant and sizeable degree. These terms include insults to someone's appearance (e.g., "*ugly*"), intellect (e.g., "*stupid*"), sexual experience (e.g., "*promiscuous*"), mental stability (e.g., "*crazy*"), and age (e.g., "*old*").

This finding exhibits socially constructed tension between the structuring of womanhood (in social practice and media representation) and women's lived experience to be inadequate for them to assume leadership positions in the public domain. Thus, the category of 'woman' as used within derogatory social media comment is codified as submissive, marginal and powerless, hovering at the periphery of decision-making process, leadership roles and exercising voice. Furthermore, these comments further imply that women can only be considered suitable for public office or leadership positions, if men approve it.

As such, it is critical to breaking the chain of reinforcing negative stereotypes of women and their abilities. Moreover, we observed that the attacks against participant 1 were undoubtedly extremely misogynistic and sexist. They were focused mainly on her strong character as a lawyer, entrepreneur and intelligent woman and the fact that she is very outspoken. The excessive harassment, insults and fierce criticism that the First Lady faced, particularly online, forced her to outburst her anger against her trolls, [76]: "*I am not particularly fashionable or flashy. I don't have an asset base which I accumulated after being first lady, so the only trope they can reduce me to is: 'She married this older powerful man,' and I think our relationship deserves the grace of not being reduced to that*".

It is clear that the increased participation of women in politics will remain elusive if online misogynistic and bullying are not addressed decisively. The reason for this, according to Dalton [77] also lies in the fact that women in politics often do not dare to talk about sexist attacks against them publicly, since they are afraid of being accused of playing the "gender card".

We further observed that sexist online harassment does not occur at random, but is strategic in nature and aimed at reinforcing gender inequality [71]. While significant

efforts by the Namibian government are directed towards the Visions 2030 goal of at least 50:50 gender representation, there is a clear manifestation of patriarchal cultural norms of undermining and silencing women's voices from participating in political spaces. It remains striking that: how can gender equality be achieved and gender-based violence erased if those who have the power and ability to change the laws are not really acting. As this phenomenon is a contentious issue, the Namibian government should consider online forms of violence as a serious hindrance to the government's effort to empowerment, promotion of human rights and curb gender-based violence. Thus, there is a dire need to review the government's legislature and fast-track all legal structures to address the issues of online gender-based violence in existing policies.

6. Conclusions

The findings show that enduring gender-based violence continues unabated in the Namibian context. In this digital age and numerous social networks, it was observed that the Namibian societal structures place men in the dominant position with women playing a subordinate role. As result, women continue to be oppressed as they are exposed to a large canvas of humiliating trolls by the online public. Women empowerment is misunderstood across the country and the misogynistic social media comments confirm the insecurities of men regarding women transformation. It furthermore increasingly contradicts societal perceptions of what it means to be a woman, ultimately perpetuating GBV, [45]. It demonstrates that economic, cultural, social and religious factors drive GBV in the country. Unsurprisingly, the way women's public figures are perceived and ridiculed on social media reveals how the Namibian society has not welcomed women leaders and public figures as equal participants and contributors to political leadership and decision making. The prevalent sexualization and genderisation depict a catastrophic reality of what women are experiencing daily, which ought to be understood from the fourth wave feminism in social media in Namibia.

We also conclude that if women's public figures are relegated to mere gendered roles and being sexualized in this manner, then Namibia's public space has not welcomed women as equal citizens, active role players, beyond gender and sex. Women's public figures serve as role models to many women at all levels of society. Thus, the way social media rejects their meaningful contributions, discourages most if not all women to occupy leadership positions and as active participants in public discourses in Namibia.

The portrayal of women in the social media towards women public figures confirms that, if there are no policies and regulations to educate and guide democratic public discourses through social media, it will be difficult, if not impossible for women to assert their voices and exercise their rights as citizens and active participants. Therefore, addressing such an ill tendency necessitates concerted efforts and spirited disposition from social media firms to educate, discipline and regulate public discourses if an apt democratic engagement is to be realised.

We contend that contemporary social media has failed to create a conducive environment for critical and meaningful participation, which is free from sexualization, genderisation and dehumanization. Interestingly, social media platforms currently offer a variety of settings to address online abuse, but these tools are not always easy to find or use. The reporting process is one of the most challenging aspects of managing online abuse. Finally, to effectively regulate the use of social media to propagate hate speech and foul language, we recommend that both internet providers and the various social media management teams to develop a program that educates, regulates and monitors the type of content that should share on their platforms. This will necessitate actions on the unwanted content that is relating to abusive and dehumanization language and gender-based violence via Namibia's social media platforms. Furthermore, the insights adduced in this study are instructive in advocating the challenges of and addressing the gender-based violence and discrimination issues that continue to affect Namibian women, and thereby seek justice for women who are suffering from sexist attacks from online predators.

Lastly, it is worth noticing that, although we did not fully explore online violence towards marginalized groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) they also might have experienced several challenges including discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. This is an area that necessitates further studies.

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