



## **How Far Can Women's Grassroots Movements Go?** **The Role of Governance in Tackling OGBV in Politics**

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Due to international pressure, many developing and developed States have shown a universal commitment to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which encompasses 17 SDGs including SDG 5--realizing gender equality. Part of advancing gender equality necessitated the inclusion of women in the public sphere by enabling women to serve in State institutions, such as parliaments, and empowering women to play a role in politics. Despite, however, the tremendous global efforts exerted in realizing offline gender parity in the political arena, many people, in addition to public institutions, across different States still perceive online violence against female state actors as unproblematic, irrespective of its gravity. Women in politics witness online gender-based violence (OGBV) as in online bullying, trolling, cyber stalking, defamation and hate speech, public shaming, and identity theft and hacking, amongst other offences. The aim behind OGBV is to maintain offline-held "social and cultural stereotypes about women's social roles and civic and political participation" to keep women confined to private spaces because they are 'women.' For example, in a press conference in 2012 in Australia, at-the-time Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, stated she had been attacked by 'misogynists and nut jobs on the internet'. Another female politician, Natalie McGarry, the MP for Glasgow East, had to reinforce her personal security at her office, having received online death threats. Accordingly, threats of violence online can cause women to fear for their physical safety and ultimately dissuade them from performing their duties. In response, various scholarly work advocated for the reinforcement of the state apparatus's control over digital platforms only through, enforcing surveillance, and implementing laws to preclude OGBV. This paper argues, however, that there should be a 'grassroots solution' endorsed by State and Civil Society actors to raise awareness about digital literacy and the legal rights associated with it.

In response to the internationally-set standards of behaviour, States party to international conventions--such as, CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and Declaration of the Elimination of Violence Against Women--are obliged to set an example in reducing the gender gap and defending women rights. Yet, international norms are only effective if intercepted with a government involvement, and therefore laws are regarded as the greatest form of government engagement in influencing norms. Legislation in that sense sets out the rights of

women to live in an anti-aggression environment: It can provide a “deterrence function”, but also be responsive to victims by providing protection and access to support services.

However, it is equally subtle to argue that laws on their own can alter the rudiments of informal social norms that are internally embraced by individuals, immensely entrenched in culture and sustained at systemic and community levels. These norms which encompass “traditions, beliefs, attitudes, norms, practices” require intervention from entities that are closely related to regular citizens to influence their behaviour and alternate their patriarchal beliefs. It is of utmost significance to understand the complexity of culture as in being “slower” to adjust than “formal policy or law”, and “law and policy do not automatically create changes in culture.”

Even if legislation can enable public opinion and influence societal behaviours, it still requires effective enforcement mechanisms. It is not only about creating laws, but also about bringing dynamic changes within the legal, institutional, and social structures to reverse toxic, patriarchal conceptions that aim to render women subordinate to men in an especially male-dominated arena such as politics. In a study of laws targeting gender-based violence in El Salvador, in spite of the presence of ‘legal protections’, justice officials often conceptualize violence against women as “ordinary”. Hence, no action is taken.

Most importantly, law has regularly been delayed to react to the development of new technologies as apparatuses of misuse, even in democracies. Precariousness about the real identity of cyber perpetrators “in a world of fluid identities”; trepidation of escalated attack; destitution of ‘awareness’ – or a ‘mistrust’ – of legal systems; all function as impediments to tackling OGBV. Laws are therefore a necessary yet, not sufficient mechanism for providing proper security and redress for women against cybercrimes without exposing them to “further victimization”.

In numerous nations, aggression against female state actors online sits at the convergence of various social and political complexities such as standardized sexism, feeble principle of law, and the institutionalization of political and criminal savagery. This paper, therefore, sets forth the premise of unraveling the role of governance rather than government. Governance is a more extensive term than government in that it envelops the climate wherein the government and state institutions engage with external stakeholders such as the private sector and Civil Society/non state actors. This term hence recognizes the role that Civil Society does in local governance.

Within Civil Society there are various actors such as non-governmental organizations, charitable organizations, and also grassroots entities. Grassroot Civil Society actors, unlike State institutions, can even evolve at a faster rate in response to societal variations and contextual changes. They are also “tech savvy” given how frequently they rely on digital media platforms through posting visual content to appeal to the greatest number of people and raise awareness with the aim of highlighting their purposes and causes. Grassroots women’s organizations/movements are important for acknowledging women's needs and actualizing advancement intercessions in the digital age. However, it is essential to emphasize how the State

can render the impacts of grassroots movements almost ineffective if it does not choose to support them. According to the Web Foundation, its survey research findings show in Uganda that around “45 percent of women in Uganda face online harassment.” The research findings attribute it to the destitution of “legal enforcement” and “continued impunity for online abuse”, both of which barricade grassroots movements from holding perpetrators liable for their digital aggressions against women, including those in politics.

The example of Assault Police--an online grassroots movement in Egypt that emerged in Summer 2020, is quite the opposite to Uganda's case when it comes to co-optation. Assault Police used its social media platform--Instagram, to raise awareness on sexual assault incidents and call out harassers and rapists, such Ahmed Bassam Zaki and the alleged gang rapists in the Fairmont hotel incident. The Instagram page was able to captivate thousands of followers who then took to their own social media pages to advocate for women rights and express dissent against sexual violence. In response to the domestic, social media pressure, the government co-opted the online movement: It passed a legislative amendment in the penal code to protect the identities of victims of sexual assault during court cases. Accordingly, girls and women who have suffered an alleged act of violence can report without feeling apprehensive about their information being disclosed particularly to perpetrators who could use this data for revenge. In addition, public institutions such as the National Council for Women and Al-Azhar have been quite supportive to the movement, which further “legitimized the movement for so many people”. As a result of the co-optation effect by the government and its associated public institutions, and the incredible outreach by Assault Police online movement, sexual violence discourses have been initiated “within families, friends, educational institutions, and workplaces.” Although this instance is not specifically harped on OGBV against women in politics, it emphatically underscores the significance of ‘co-optation’, in which case State and non-State actors collaborate, with their own resources and agency, on fighting sexual aggression against women, specifically those with a ‘public voice’.

The complex nature of gender-based violence and cyber crimes requires the invention of all-encompassing methodologies that are custom fitted to the political setting. If the government’s goal is to enable sustainable and transformative change in women’s lives, it should not exclusively rely on the subtle introduction of laws to address social problems that rather necessitate grassroots solutions to dissolve the social, cultural, legal, and political barriers to full gender parity. It should establish national policies and funding, which enhance scale and sustainability; while also mobilizing Civil Society to innovate, reach and educate people, and enhance accountability. Other entities such as tech companies are also important in regulating online platforms; yet, the basis should be laid down by State and non-State actors together, as people need to learn what there is to know about gender-based cyber crimes through awareness campaigns, and laws alone will not be able to deliver this mission.