IGF 2021
Best Practice Forum
Gender and Digital Rights

Summary report of the BPF's Learning sessions on the concept of
Gendered Disinformation

April – July 2021

Introduction

The Best Practice Forums (BPFs) are an intersessional activity of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). They provide a platform to exchange experiences in addressing Internet policy issues. BPF outputs intend to contribute to an understanding of global good practice, and to serve as a resource to inform policy discussions, standards development, business decisions, as well as public understanding, awareness, and discourse. BPFs are an initiative by the IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG), are led by a volunteer coordination team and supported by the IGF Secretariat.

The 2021 BPF Gender and Digital Rights kicked off with a virtual meeting on 18 May and works in line with its MAG endorsed proposal towards the 16th IGF meeting (6-10 December).

Topic and work plan

The BPF is exploring the concept of GENDERED DISINFORMATION and intends to contribute to a better understanding of
- how gender based disinformation has been deployed as a strategy against women and gender-diverse groups;
- how the negative effects of gendered disinformation spill over to other sets of rights, such as political participation, what allows it to be used as larger political projects of moral policing, censorship, and hierarchisation of citizenship and rights;

and intends to
- map strategies and actions to halt the spread of gendered disinformation and build a less toxic environment for female and gender-diverse groups online;

● showcase positive initiatives that set the beginning of what can be a longer term multistakeholder dialogue on gendered disinformation.

More details and update on the BPF Gender and Digital Rights [webpage](#).

Exploring the concept of gendered disinformation - the BPF Learning sessions

Between May and August 2021, the BPF organised a series of learning sessions with experts and stakeholders to explore the concept of gendered disinformation. This report provides a summary to serve as background for the BPF's work in the second half of the year.

Overview of the learning sessions

Call I   Gendered disinformation, a concept under construction.

Call II   Disinformation and Freedom of Expression.
              Effects of Gendered disinformation on the Journalist community.

Call III   Roundtable discussion. Updates and insights from BPF participants on gendered disinformation.

Call IV   Documenting gendered disinformation facing women leaders.
              Intersectionality of disinformation.

Call V   Gendered disinformation - Impacts and potential roadmaps to solutions.

Summaries of the learning sessions

Call I - Gendered disinformation, a concept under construction

Recording: [Call I](#), code +ZW6kGwe , [slides](#)

Invited expert:
Debora Albu, *Program Coordinator & Researcher, BPF co-facilitator*

- Gender, despite being discussed for decades, as well as disinformation are concepts under construction. As a result, exploring a concept that combines both is complex.
- Disinformation differentiates from misinformation, as it has a deliberate intent to misinform and an objective to harm. It's important to consider its negative impact on democracies and politics as a whole.
- Disinformation campaigns disproportionately target people based on gender and reinforce gender stereotypes. It's a two-layered issue that has a target (who) and content (message) component.

- Gendered disinformation is being developed in literature as an umbrella concept, covering other types of disinformation, such as misogynistic disinformation.
- Gendered disinformation entails amongst other: misogynistic comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualisation and diffusion of graphic contents, online harassment, cyberattacks, weaponizing of online spaces to exclude women and gender diverse groups.
- Disinformation campaigns are usually against women and gender diverse people in public positions (politicians, journalists, leaders); or targeted against gender equality issues (e.g. sexual and reproductive rights).
- The main effects of gendered disinformation on women and gender diverse groups are perpetuating inequality, undermining credibility in occupying positions of power, discouraging participation in the public debate, silencing, and may have 'offline effects' such as fear for physical safety.
- Where to draw the line between gendered disinformation and hate speech, gendered disinformation and gender based online violence ?
- An intersectional approach is needed to get to a further understanding of the issue and take into account other dimensions of identity (such as race, class, theritory, sexuality).

BPF Discussion Call I
- How does gendered disinformation and hate speech intersect, and can (or how can) addressing gendered disinformation benefit from the established body of protections and measures relating to online hate speech ?
- Depending on the type of perpetrators and level of coordination, gendered disinformation will have different implications.
- Looking at disinformation attacks against those reporting on gender disinformation or gender issues (including journalists), and its effect on other bodies and people should be included to get the bigger picture.

Call II - Disinformation and Freedom of Expression

Recording: Call II, code D@&3.sW4 , slides

Invited expert:
Marwa Azelmat*, Women's Rights Policy Advocacy Lead, Association for Progressive Communications,* https://www.apc.org

- Robust access to public information systems, a plural, accessible and diverse media context, availability of independent and qualified journalism, and safety to express ideas are all necessary elements of a healthy information system.
- Disinformation should be understood beyond electoral narratives.
- Disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced and enforced by automated technology.

- Disinformation and gendered disinformation are particularly targeted against vulnerable and marginalised groups, including minorities and migrant populations, with a dangerous impact, especially for women and people of diverse gender and sexuality.
- Disinformation campaigns can be categorised by the underlying intentions: foreign influence (e.g. by foreign actors), political (e.g. to push an agenda or undermine adversaries), lucrative (e.g. to gain profit), issue based (e.g. serving an ideology or financial goal).
- Gendered disinformation can be considered as a weaponization of online gender based violence.
- Gendered disinformation campaigns are distinct from hate speech and stigmatisation, which is important for social media and content moderation policies.
- There are examples of disinformation campaigns against rights defenders, activists and their causes that have escalated to criminalisation.
- Growing professionalisation of the disinformation sector into a lucrative global business, with campaigns planned and executed by specialised brokers (so called 'black PR firms') hired by politicians, parties, governments and other clients, to target journalists, human rights defenders, and opposition voices.
- These types of professional campaigns remain often under the radar of content moderation policies and are difficult to escalate to social media companies.
- **Links and background in formation**:
    - APC's research paper on Disinformation and Freedom of Expression https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/APCSubmissionDisinformationFebruary2021.pdf .
    - …

Effects of gendered disinformation on the journalist community

Invited expert:
Dr. Courtney Radsch, *independent tech policy advisor and strategic advocacy consultant, International Women's Media Foundation, Global Forum for Media Development, ARTICLE19, www.mediatedspeech.com ; MAG member*

- The rhetoric around fake news has increasingly translated into legislation and regulation that, purportedly designed to reduce misinformation and disinformation, but is used to weaponize the ability to restrict independent and critical journalism. (evidence around the world of disinformation campaigns and the use of such 'anti fake news' laws against critical journalists investigating the government's covid-19 response.)
- Disinformation and online harassment that targets journalists and media organizations, and undermines, drowns out and delegitimizes real news is an increasingly common strategy in political systems in all kinds, from democratic to authoritarian contexts.
- Online harassment and disinformation campaigns overwhelmingly target women and minority journalists, especially those with intersectional identities, and have become a quotidian part of their professional experience.

- Attempts to silence critics and manipulate public opinion by targeting journalists and media outlets undermines the sustainability of independent journalism.
- Journalism occupies a distinct place in the media and is critical to the public's access to information and belief in the truth of information.
- Journalists reporting on disinformation operations often become themselves the target of coordinated campaigns.
- Online campaigns deployed against journalists and independent news outlets typically are a combination of tactics, which can be divided in six categories: abuse, threats, exposure, smearing, exclusion, disinformation.
- Closed private groups on social media and private messaging apps are being used to discuss and coordinate the messaging that then proliferates across the public web.
- What counts as exposure can differ from country and context.
- Online violence has led to offline violence and even murder of journalists.
- Increasing sophistication and reduction in costs of manipulating e.g., deep fake video and audio, makes it virtually impossible for an average user, reader, or citizen to distinguish between what is real/accurate and fabricated.
- Studies show that fake news travels faster on online networks and risks to drown out accurate journalism.
- Questions: who's the perpetrator? what's the context? is an attack beat endemic or context specific? what are the nature of the threats? what can platforms do?
- Platforms have a responsibility to come up with ways to combat online harassment against journalists and human rights defenders (including what's the impact of the design of the platform, terms of services, etc.?)
- Journalism as fundamental pillar of democracy, and a way for citizens to hold their government accountable is at risk.
- **Links and background information**:
    - "Press Freedom in an Age of Information Warfare"
      https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VhClDdO9s54
    - https://onlineviolenceresponsehub.org
    - https://iwmf.org/programs/online-harassment

BPF Discussion call II
- What would be effective ways for platforms to address these issues and better protect human rights online, including female journalists? (self-regulation?, regulation & enforcement?, other means?)
- Research is needed to learn about the impact and effectiveness of types of tools individual networks have rolled out. Platforms to agree to collect and share data with researchers.
- Many current solutions put the onus onto the individual (e.g., mute or unfriend button). Platforms need to make it easier to collect documentation of online harassment, without requiring documenting every interaction.
- Changes to the platforms' terms of service may be considered (e.g. prohibit the sale of influence, anonymous groups, prohibit and track owners behind large numbers of accounts, etc.)
- Effort needed to enforce existing legal frameworks and protections online.

- BPF / IGF could help to make the linkage between platform governance & big tech, (gendered) disinformation, and the threat to freedom of expression. This would provide a new entrance point for different mandate holders that are struggling to effectively tackle disinformation from a governance perspective.

Call III - Roundtable discussion. Updates and insights from BPF participants on gendered disinformation

Recording: Call III, code uaQ6pNR# , slides

BPF Roundtable Discussion
- In some places, especially in rural areas, women can be targets of disinformation offline when for example they are portrayed in their community as 'loose women' because they have a smartphone and spend time online.
- Misquoting female journalists is a known tactic and has led to more severe actions with on and offline impact (including fake pornographic videos, police restrain orders)
- Doxing has taken new forms, e.g., with social media handles, and often comes alone as part of a broader online campaign.
- Code, software, and algorithms affect how different communities find themselves online. Algorithms used in applications and dating platforms don't necessarily match or are helpful in creating a safer and healthier space for intimacy and relationships for women, different sexualities and different gender identifying folk.
- Gendered disinformation can result in the exclusion of queer and gender diverse people from online spaces where they don't feel safe and, instead have them look for niches.
- Sexual and reproductive rights play an important role in gendered disinformation and can escalate to serious threats and risks to a woman's integrity.
- Should, apart from looking at the narrative addressed to women, the analysis of gendered disinformation also includes disinformation around the gender perspective, for example when trolls or fake accounts are used to infiltrate in feminist groups with the intention to spread and advocate certain narratives or perspectives?
- Techniques used progress and evolve, what makes it harder to recognise (including for platforms to take actions).
- Groups and content are traveling to new platforms, which are sometimes out of reach of any oversight.
- Is there an intersection in research between gendered disinformation, children's safety online, children and education, including sex and intimacy education at a younger age?

Call IV - **Documenting gendered disinformation facing women leaders**

Invited expert:

***Kristina Wilfore**, Co-founder, #ShePersisted Global, https://www.she-persisted.org*

- Prevalence of online violence against women is global, and life online during COVID worsened the situation.
- Definition gendered disinformation used:
  Nature and target: the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against *women* political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that often draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women.
  Motivation: Designed to alter public perception of female politicians' track records for immediate political gain, as well as to encourage women seeking political careers.
- Gendered disinformation is a combination of sexism and misogyny, disinformation, and online violence.
- Empirical evidence shows increasing prevalence, but more tracking of women's experience online is needed.
- Attack lines: Leadership bias (attacks portraying women as untrustworthy, unqualified, unlikable, emotional, are obstacles to enter office); sexualized attacks; character attacks (attacks against women are more likely to focus on character and not include facts).
- '96% of all existing deep fakes circulating online feature women in acts of nonconsensual pornography'
- Difficult to identify the source of deep fakes or to demonstrate that they are part of larger influence operations.
- The responsibility for responding should not be a burden put on the targets or victims.
- Ultimate goal of silencing women is an erosion of democracy. Authoritarian leaders used gendered disinformation to silence women and undermine the participation of citizens in democracy.
- There's a weaponization of gendered disinformation that serves multiple goals and reaches much further than individual men harassing individual women.
- New taxonomies are developed and used in attacks aimed at women online, for example the creation of the term "presstitute" - a combination of press and prostitute.
- Social media networks are more likely to ignore gendered disinformation campaigns in countries where there is no risk PR risk for the company
- Hate and abuse online risks becoming normalized because there are no adequate systems in place to push back.
- The role of digital platforms is often left out of discussions about violence against women online.
- Digital platform tools and algorithms reward and amplify hate for profit. As such social media platforms provide the bad actors with the tools to undermine women and democracy. (Building audience, provide a megaphone to amplify, raise money, radicalise, organise …)
- A more effective push back focused on the digital platforms is needed.

- Initiatives that solely focus on improving the reporting system shift the burden to women and often miss the mark because restrictions remain unenforced due to a lack of accountability. Notice and take down models fail to address the systemic nature of online abuse.
- Social media platforms should focus on implementing their existing terms of service and responding in a more targeted way to threats, by: quickly removing posts;
    - eliminating malicious hate speech;
    - removing accounts that repeatedly violate terms of service;
    - Moving manipulated images or videos misrepresenting women public figures;
    - Removing actors engaged in coordinated inauthentic behaviour;
    - Reducing the distribution of content rated false (including gendered disinformation).
- An international framework is recommended to bring together researchers, lawmakers, regulators, to focus on harm and avoid gender blind recommendations for addressing disinformation. Media / digital literacy and fact checking cannot represent a viable solution to gendered disinformation. Instead one needs to focus on the algorithms and tools that make hate and misogyny profitable for the social networks' business model. Governments should lean into a duty of care model that avoids controversy around what to do with legal or illegal content debates.
- Considerations of free speech and the consequently status quo forces women to limit their freedom of expression, self-censor, or disengage.
- **Links and background information**:
    - Ms. Magazine,Holding Big Tech Accountable for Online Violence Against Women and Gendered Disinformation https://msmagazine.com/2021/07/15/big-tech-online-violence-against-women-misinformation-gender-facebook/
    - Brookings Institute: Gendered disinformation is a national security problem https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/
    - Reporting in an Era of Disinformation - Fairness Guide for Covering Women and People of Color Without Bias https://weareuv.us/2020guide
    - Additional resources on #ShePersisted https://www.she-persisted.org/
    - Lawmakers Letter to Facebook Demanding it Stop the Spread of Gendered Disinformation and Misogynistic Attacks Against Women Leaders https://speier.house.gov/press-releases?ID=89435C88-5DC7-49C8-9B1A-D5300408F604
    - NYT: Fake Nudes and Real Threats: How Online Abuse Holds Back Women in Politics https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/03/us/disinformation-online-attacks-female-politicians.html
    - Canadian Women Leader' Digital Defense Initiative White Paper on Gendered Disinformation in Canada https://issuu.com/migsinstitute/docs/whitepaper_final_version.docx

Intersectionality of disinformation

Invited expert:
Maria Giovanna Sessa, , *Research coordinator at EU DisinfoLab,* https://www.disinfo.eu

- Disinformation has the capability to adapt to the surrounding context. (e.g. the rise in hoaxes, false and misleading news during the pandemic).
- Gendered disinformation exists at the intersection of disinformation with online violence.
- Gendered disinformation is amplified when the target belongs to a marginalized group.
- Women are addressed through a madonna-whore complex, a simplification of women who are believed to be bi-dimensional figures, either saint-like figures (e.g. mothers, caretakers, victims) or evil beings pushing a hidden agenda.
- Super spreaders of gendered disinformation can often be found in far right or extremist parties and often apply double standards.
- Also the media has a responsibility and can act in some cases as a super spreader of gendered disinformation presenting simplified narratives that blame and/or victimize women or echoing stereotypes.
- In the near future, Gendered disinformation beyond a binary conception of gender, research and conversations should also include gender non conforming identities.
- **Links and background information**: (an EU DisinfoLab piece with an exhaustive list of resources will be published next month)

BPF Discussion call IV
- How to formulate an effective response to gendered disinformation that acknowledges free speech, without giving into the argument that violent speech is free speech, and contribute to the understanding that one person's expression can be detrimental to a woman's freedom of expression?
- Free speech in the tech sector is typically interpreted in a unidirectional way.
- How campaigns are organised and how sexism   works in politics, including how it is a barrier to women's participation, is not well understood.
- Media and reporting on gendered disinformation risks to do more damage when it just reports on the narratives without carrying about the discrimination and sexism involved.
- To avoid that rules and regulations only fit a white male perspective, women should be included in decisions on solutions (e.g. within big tech companies).
- Specificities in languages, regions and local cultures make a one size fits all approach ineffective.
- Platforms are typically afraid of interfering in the political discourse and requests to improve the response and reporting facilities and tools for users to gain more control remain unanswered.
- The BPF could contribute by highlight the body of evidence on gendered disinformation, raise awareness about the effects of gendered disinformation for the women targeted and society as a whole, stimulating more research, surfacing how attacks are organised and what

tools are being used, and bring to the table the lack of enforcement of existing rules and regulations (e.g. in terms of services, moderation mechanisms).

- The self-regulating mechanism is failing.
- Platforms regulations and approaches need to move beyond the notice and take down model. A holistic approach is needed that takes into account a systematics risk assessment. Content moderation remains important, but remains often understaffed and under-resourced to be able to cover different languages and cultures.
- Doxing , bullying, etc. among children and young people is an articulate problem but not much research is available.

Call V - Gendered disinformation - Impacts and potential roadmaps to solutions

Recording: Call V, code 8U&tb93% , agenda

Invited expert:
Ellen Judson, Senior Researcher at CASM , Demos, https://demos.co.uk/research-area/casm/

- Working definition of gendered disinformation:
  Gendered disinformation is manipulated information that weaponises gendered stereotypes for political, economic or social ends.
- Gendered disinformation can be false information or based on true information that is presented in a misleading way or inauthentically amplified. Typical examples are faked or doctored content (incl. sexual images), coordinated abuse denigrating a woman's character, caricaturization and demonisation of supporters of gender equality.
- Gendered disinformation can target individuals and/or issues:
  - It can used to try to silence an individual target: with gendered narratives and gender stereotypes used as tools l to indicate that a person is not credible, not to be trusted, unfit for a public role, for office, etc.; Other aspects of people's identity (e.g. race, ethnicity, religion) may also be weaponized against those targeted by gendered disinformation campaigns.
  - It can also be used to undermine support for gender justice(women's rights, LGBT+ rights, reproductive rights, etc.): people who support these rights or are members of particular communities have gendered narratives weaponised against them to portray them as immoral, a threat, etc.
- Impacts of gendered disinformation on different audiences
  - Targets - individual impact on those targeted (e.g. psychological impact, threats to their safety, unable to participate in public life)
  - Observers - democratic impact (people seeing the campaign happening and adjusting their behaviour or opinion, e.g. deciding not to run for office, voters changing their opinion about a candidate, etc.)
  - Affected groups' - security and human rights impact of campaigns (e.g. impact of campaigns on the situation and lives of women or LGBT people in general)

- We need to not think of abuse and disinformation as totally different problems that require different sets of solutions if we are to tackle gendered disinformation:
    - Solutions to disinformation currently tend to focus on fact checking, education, literacy, etc.
    - Solutions to gender abuse currently tend to focus on putting the burden onto those targeted to protect themselves and take action against individual harassers, through greater reporting, etc.
- Choosing one set of solutions to tackle gendered disinformation cannot deliver satisfactory results. Gendered disinformation is based on emotions, values, stereotypes, rumors, etc., which can't, or can only partially, be fact-checked. Gendered disinformation campaigns are by nature systematic and pervasive and rely on scale and amplification - which makes it exhausting and impossible for people to protect themselves through individual action - and requires macro and top-down solutions.
- Challenges to tackling gendered disinformation:
    - 'Malign creativity' (Jankowicz et al.) - gendered disinformation has the potential to evolve and adapt to new situations: the use of coded language and images, metaphors and analogies, which may hide the abusive and misleading character, results in messages not being picked up by algorithms and automated filtering;
    - Context dependency - local embedded knowledge of the political and social context and language may be needed to identify messages that are abusive or misleading, which is currently not sufficiently invested in or utilised by major platforms
    - Legality - in certain jurisdictions at least, most messages will not cross the line into illegal speech, making removal harder to justify
    - Complicity - in situations where governments benefit from, or are behind, gendered disinformation campaigns, one cannot count on the government to take action.
- We need much more proactive, preventative action to change online and media environments to spaces in which gendered disinformation is less likely to arise, or be encouraged or amplified.
- Preventing, reducing, and responding to gendered disinformation require different tools and measures. When addressing gendered disinformation, one needs to be clear about which stage of the process the measures aim to tackle.
- **Links and background information**:
    - Gendered disinformation policy briefing https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat .
    - Gendered disinformation: actors involved and gendered narratives used in the Philippines and Poland https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf
    - On Malign Creativity (Jankowicz et al.) https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online

BPF Discussion call V
- Satirical or more trivial issues often get more attention or explode when women are involved.

- The IGF/BPF can contribute, by highlighting the need for more information and data access, bringing together people working on gendered disinformation, demonstrating that gendered disinformation is a problem that needs to be taken seriously.
- 'Women as threat' narrative is more individual targeting (the person is evil, stupid, dangerous, cannot be trusted, etc.) while the 'women as victim' narrative (women are weak, are at risk, need to be protected, need a strong man, etc.) is more targeting the broader issue of women's rights. Of course, there is overlap.
- Saying that a woman does not behave as a woman should behave (honor, behaviour, sexuality, femininity, family life, beauty ideal, etc.) is one of the primary tactics used and weaponised.
- Research on gender abuse harassment, and how it impacts women's participation in public life is a useful resource but more specific research on the impact of gendered disinformation is needed, e.g. on how gendered disinformation impacts the eligibility of women in politics.
- Differentiating between gendered disinformation and online gender based violence is relevant as the intention is different: while online gender based violence is often about a person abusing or attacking another person, gendered disinformation campaigns are operate at scale using different networks, e.g. involving bots, networks of trolls, paid freelancers, etc., and pursues a different outcome. Influencing the third party observers is an important objective of gendered disinformation ('this is how you should think about or act when it comes to this person).