



IGF 2021  
Best Practice Forum  
Gender and Digital Rights

# Exploring the concept of Gendered Disinformation

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## Acknowledgements

The *Best Practice Forum Gender and Digital Rights (BPF)* is an open multistakeholder effort conducted as an intersessional activity of the *Internet Governance Forum (IGF)*. This report is the draft output of the IGF 2021 BPF Gender and Digital Rights on Gendered Disinformation. The Report is the product of the collaborative work of many.

BPF Gender and Digital Rights Coordinating team

Chenai Chair (MAG Facilitator)  
Amrita Choudhury (MAG Facilitator)  
Bruna Martins dos Santos  
Debora Albu  
Marwa Azelmat  
Wim Degezelle (BPF Consultant, IGF Secretariat)

The BPF wishes to thank the Experts and key contributors to the BPF Learning sessions

Courtney Radsch,  
Ellen Judson  
Julia Haas  
Kristina Wilfore  
Lucina di Meo  
Maria Giovanna Sessa  
Victor Giusti

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### Disclaimer:

The views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Secretariat. The designations and terminology employed may not conform to United Nations practice and do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Organization.

## Executive Summary

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights, in 2021, explores the **concept of gendered disinformation**. Disinformation can be defined as **false information deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country**<sup>1</sup>. The false character of the information can also result from ‘manipulated information’ - disinformation campaigns often rely on true, distorted, or emotional content that doesn’t have a truth value. **Gendered disinformation** then attacks or undermines people based on their gender, or weaponizes gendered narratives for political, social or economic objectives.

The IGF Best Practice Forums (BPFs) provide a platform for experts and stakeholders to exchange experiences in addressing Internet policy issues, discuss and identify emerging and existing good practices. The objective is to collect from community experience, not to develop new policies or practices. 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.

While specialist discussions and research continue at different venues to define gendered disinformation, and understand its mechanisms and impact, the BPF aims to provide a space to bring the issue to Internet governance discussions, raise awareness about the problem, call for action and share experiences with possible ways to mediate.

In the report gendered disinformation includes disinformation against people on the grounds of their gender and social constructs, including their gender identity and/or gender expression as well as disinformation against people on the grounds of sexual orientation - which often has gendered dimensions and weaponizes gendered stereotypes in similar ways. Misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia are common features of gendered disinformation.

Disinformation differentiates from misinformation as it has the deliberate intent to misinform and an objective to harm.

The concept of gendered disinformation means any false and manipulated information that is intended to cause harm to women or people of diverse genders and sexualities. Gendered disinformation campaigns often target individuals with higher public status or holding higher positions such as politicians, CEOs, public advocates, journalists etc. According to Professor Alana Mocerri (IE School of Global and Public Affairs), gendered disinformation delegitimizes women’s participation in political life, undermining democracy and human rights all over the world. Disinformation may also be used to harm gender diverse people as it takes on disinformation which may escalate to instances of hate-based crimes and killings in hostile environments against gender diversity and sexuality<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> WARDLE, Claire; DERAKHSHAN, Hossein. Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe, Aug. 2018, 2nd revised edition. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>.

Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training.

<https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO\\_BRI\(2021\)653644\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO_BRI(2021)653644_EN.pdf)

In its discussions, the BPF approached the concept of gendered disinformation from the definition compiled by Judson et. al<sup>3</sup>:

The term “**gendered disinformation**” can be used to describe information activities (creating, sharing, disseminating content) which:

- a) Attacks or undermines people on the basis of their gender.
- b) Weaponizes gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives.

Other working definitions are slightly different. Lucina Di Meo, for example, originally defined gendered disinformation as the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that draw on misogyny and stereotypical gender roles.<sup>4</sup>

Gendered disinformation comes in different forms, such as, harmful social media posts and graphics, sexual fabrications, and other forms of conspiracy theories, and is used in different situations and at different places. The BPF discussed instances of gendered disinformation that are recognizable and visible, and shed light on the potential direct and indirect impact:

*Everyday gendered disinformation* - Not only those in high profile positions, those taking up engagement very visibly in their communities as rights defenders, or those having or aspiring political careers, are targets of gendered disinformation. Also women and gender diverse people who prefer not being on the barricades, can feel the impact of gendered disinformation, and for example the stereotypes that are spread.

*Youth experiences* - Misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women.

*Journalists* - Gendered disinformation campaigns – on both the individual journalist as well as other journalists and women in general – are particularly effective if combined with other attacks, such as online harassment and abuse, which is often gendered and aims at silencing women's voices in the public sphere.

*Politicians* - Rather than directly attacking the policy decisions women make, gender stereotypical characteristics and physical appearance are used instead, to challenge female politicians. It ultimately aims to paint the picture that women are unfit for leadership. It portrays women nominated or assigned higher public offices as unfit/undeserving/incompetent of such a position, which undermines their capabilities to lead. Consequently, this discourages other women from pursuing political careers or other higher positions.

*Women Human Rights Defenders* - In a global environment of hostility and intolerance against civil society actors, women’s human rights defenders (WHRDs) remain particularly affected by the rise of gendered disinformation.

While gender disinformation is prevalent and growing, it is still a concept under construction. Being an issue that is rapidly expanding and developing, there are yet no clearly identified best practices. Rather

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<sup>3</sup> Based on Judson et al, 2020, p. 7, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/36786/1/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Lucina Di Meo, “Online Threats to Women’s Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them,” (Paper presented at the Sixty-Fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, October 5-8, 2020), 4.

what has been observed is that most nations and communities are trying to respond or take action to address the issue based on their experience and resources.

The primary burden of tackling gendered disinformation needs to fall on the social media platforms amplifying the harms rather than on the women targeted by such campaigns and the social media users viewing them. Addressing gendered disinformation requires a multistakeholder approach. A multistakeholder approach ensures that we work towards a balance of rights, in particular disinformation and freedom of expression, as well as that all stakeholders involved are part of the process.

Action against gendered disinformation must not only be reactive, or focused on how an individual 'ought' to respond to a campaign against them. We need much more proactive action to reduce the risk of gendered disinformation occurring and prevent it from being amplified, and to better support those individuals put at risk because of it.

At IGF 2021, the BPF on Gender and Digital Rights held an open roundtable discussion on gendered disinformation and formulated the following calls to action:

- There is a need to engage all political players, in particular political parties, to improve awareness of the existence of gendered disinformation and the understanding of the impact of gendered disinformation for reaching political equity.
- There is a need to connect gendered disinformation to other human rights violations such as freedom of association or safety of marginalised groups. Reaching out, engaging, and exchanging experiences with groups who have already been dealing with disinformation can benefit all.
- The multistakeholder process provides a mechanism where solutions beyond legislation and regulation can be developed and propagated. It would also see stakeholders recommending solutions based on their role in the digital ecosystem
- The IGF and other UN Forums can play an important role to involve and commit stakeholders to take action.

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# 1. Introduction

The Internet Governance Forum (IGF) Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights, in 2021, explores the **concept of gendered disinformation**. Disinformation can be defined as **false information deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country**<sup>5</sup>. The false character of the information can also result from ‘manipulated information’ - disinformation campaigns often rely on true, distorted, or emotional content that doesn’t have a truth value. **Gendered disinformation** then attacks or undermines people based on their gender, or weaponizes gendered narratives for political, social or economic objectives.

As the issues and challenges with information shared and consumed online advance, they gain nuances and levels of complexity. In the current context, it is timely to explore the concept of gendered disinformation, its relation with online gender-based violence and hate speech, as well as its immediate effects on women and gender-diverse groups’ existence online and their freedom of expression.

The IGF is instrumental to explore the policy and governance challenges and opportunities related to gendered disinformation, to mobilize for multi-stakeholder, coordinated and organized efforts to tackle the issue from a structural, intersectional perspective while leveraging on existing responses and emerging best practices.

## About the Internet Governance Forum (IGF)

The *Internet Governance Forum (IGF)* is a global forum, convened<sup>6</sup> by the United Nations Secretary-General, where governments, civil society, the Internet technical community, academia, the private sector, and independent experts discuss Internet governance and policy issues.<sup>7</sup>

IGF 2021 is the sixteenth annual meeting of the forum. The hybrid event is hosted by the Government of Poland in Katowice on 6-10 December 2021 and online. The overarching theme of IGF2021 is “Internet United”.

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<sup>5</sup> WARDLE, Claire; DERAKHSHAN, Hossein. Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe, Aug. 2018, 2nd revised edition. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>.

Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training. <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

<sup>6</sup> The [resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 16 December 2015 \(70/125\)](#), “Outcome document of the high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the overall review of the implementation of the outcomes of the World Summit on the Information Society”, extended the mandate of the IGF as set out in paragraphs 72 to 78 of the Tunis Agenda.

<sup>7</sup> IGF website: <http://www.intgovforum.org>. The IGF is one of the key outcomes of the World Summit for the Information Society (WSIS).

## IGF Best Practice Forums (BPFs)

The IGF *Best Practice Forums (BPFs)*<sup>8</sup> provide a platform for experts and stakeholders to exchange experiences in addressing Internet policy issues, discuss and identify emerging and existing good practices.<sup>9</sup> BPFs are expected to be open, bottom-up and collective processes, and their outputs to be community-driven.

BPFs prepare their work in a series of intersessional discussions that culminate in a BPF session at the annual IGF meeting and a report published as part of the IGF outputs.

The objective is to collect from community experience, not to develop new policies or practices. 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.

### About the BPF on Gender and Digital Rights

Since its beginning in 2015, the BPF on Gender and Access has focused on different aspects of women's meaningful access to the Internet: online abuse and gender-based violence (2015); barriers for accessing the Internet (2016); identification of the needs and challenges of diverse women's groups with respect to Internet access (2017); the impact of supplementary models of connectivity on women's Internet access (2018); and opportunities and challenges that women face to gain skills to benefit from the digital economy (2019) were the topics addressed by the community. In 2020, the BPF explored conducted an assessment of Internet-related policy processes and spaces through a feminist approach, to determine whether and how they protect and foster participation of women and gender-diverse people.

*Brief outlines of the BPF reports and links to their reports: Annex 1.*

### About the 2021 BPF on Gender and Digital Rights, gendered disinformation

BPFs are organized under the supervision of the *IGF Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG)*, which selects the topics for the BPFs.

The MAG confirmed the following topics for the 2021 BPF cycle:

- BPF on Gender and Digital Rights, on gendered disinformation.
- BPF Cybersecurity, on the use of norms to foster trust and security.

The BPF Gender and Digital Rights proposal<sup>10</sup> that was confirmed by the MAG list the following envisaged goals and deliverables, not necessarily all to be completed within the timeframe of one BPF :

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<sup>8</sup> BPFs were re-introduced in 2014 as part of the intersessional programme to complement the work of the IGF community and develop more tangible outputs to "enhance the impact of the IGF on global Internet". This intersessional programme was designed in accordance with the recommendations of a 2012 report by the Commission on Science and Technology for Development's (CSTD's) Working Group on IGF Improvements.  
[https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot\\_download/4586/588](https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/4586/588)

<sup>9</sup> BPF outputs and activities are archived on the IGF webpage: <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/bpfs-outputs>

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot\\_download/11178/2436](https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot_download/11178/2436)

- Understand how gender-based disinformation has been weaponized as a strategy against women and gender-diverse groups to exclude them from political life.
- Understand how effects on digital rights impact other sets of rights, such as political participation, what allows gendered disinformation to be used as part of larger political projects of moral policing, censorship, and shrinking of spaces and rights.
- Develop a matrix 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 long term multistakeholder dialogue on gendered disinformation.
- Provide recommendations to the Internet Governance community to address gendered disinformation

## Methodology and work plan

The BPF Gender and Digital Rights kicked off its activities in May 2021, shortly after it was confirmed by the MAG, with a brief survey to collect input on a possible definition of the concept of gendered disinformation. The survey also invited input for the BPF's work plan. A summary of can be found in annex III.

The BPF then held a series of *learning sessions* with invited experts to explore different facets of the issue of gendered disinformation. Summaries<sup>11</sup> of the learning sessions were published in August 2021 and are incorporated in this report.

In the run-up to its final session for 2021 at IGF annual meeting, the BPF prepared a discussion with relevant stakeholders to get a deeper and practical understanding of what is “beneath the disinformation lid” and aims to identify emerging best practices.

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<sup>11</sup> [https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot\\_download/5004/2636](https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot_download/5004/2636)

## 2. The Concept of Gendered Disinformation

Gender, despite being discussed for decades, and the more recent disinformation, are concepts under construction. Consequently, exploring gendered disinformation - a concept that combines both - is complex.

While specialist discussions and research continue at different venues to define gendered disinformation, understand its mechanisms and impact, the BPF aims to provide a space to bring the issue to Internet governance discussions, raise awareness about the problem, call for action and share experiences with possible ways to mediate.

### Gender

In this report gendered disinformation includes disinformation against people on the grounds of their gender and social constructs, including their gender identity and/or gender expression as well as disinformation against people on the grounds of sexual orientation - which often has gendered dimensions and weaponizes gendered stereotypes in similar ways. Misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia are common features of gendered disinformation.

People are also attacked through gendered disinformation campaigns based on multiple aspects of their identity, not exclusively gender such as religion, ethnicity, and political ideologies.

### Disinformation

Disinformation differentiates from misinformation as it has the deliberate intent to misinform and an objective to harm.

In an attempt to provide a conceptual framework for discussing different phenomena related to the spread of wrong, false and fake information Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, in a 2017 report for the Council of Europe<sup>12</sup>, introduced three different types: *misinformation*, *disinformation*, and *malinformation* defined along two dimensions, harm and falseness.

- **Misinformation** is when false information is shared, but no harm is intended.
- **Disinformation** is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.
- **Malinformation** is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

In gendered disinformation campaigns, these categories can be difficult to draw precisely, as all forms play a role in a campaign. For instance, a coordinated disinformation campaign may disseminate both genuine information, misleading or distorted information, false information, as well as value-based content that does not make claims of fact (e.g. personal attacks on someone's character). They may also rely on their

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<sup>12</sup> WARDLE, Claire; DERAKHSHAN, Hossein. Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe, Aug. 2018, 2nd revised edition. Available at: <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77>.

Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training. <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

content and tropes being picked up and shared organically, by people who may be sharing them in good faith or knowingly, but outside of the formal structure of an organized disinformation network.<sup>13</sup>

## Concept of gendered disinformation

The concept of gendered disinformation means any false and manipulated information that is intended to cause harm to women or people of diverse genders and sexualities. Gendered disinformation campaigns often target individuals with higher public status or holding higher positions such as politicians, CEOs, public advocates, journalists etc. According to Professor Alana Mocerri (IE School of Global and Public Affairs), gendered disinformation delegitimizes women's participation in political life, undermining democracy and human rights all over the world. Disinformation may also be used to harm gender diverse people as it takes on disinformation which may escalate to instances of hate-based crimes and killings in hostile environments against gender diversity and sexuality<sup>14</sup>.

In its discussions, the BPF approached the concept of gendered disinformation from the definition compiled by Judson et. al<sup>15</sup>:

The term “**gendered disinformation**” can be used to describe information activities (creating, sharing, disseminating content) which:

- a) Attacks or undermines people on the basis of their gender.
- b) Weaponizes gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives.

To collect initial feedback on this working definition, the BPF conducted a short survey in May 2021. This showed general support for the definition. Some respondents added comments to point out that weaponizing can also apply in a positive context; highlighted the very active role social media plays in spreading gendered disinformation; pointed out that gendered disinformation online exists at the intersection of disinformation with online violence and often emanates from the same source, engendering hate. It was raised that the definition doesn't separate between disinformation and hate speech; and one respondent asked whether b) implies that there should be a clear intent. The responses to the BPF kick-off survey can be found in the annexes.

Other working definitions are slightly different, addressing some of these comments. Lucina Di Meo, for example, originally defined gendered disinformation as the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that draw on misogyny and stereotypical gender roles.<sup>16</sup>

Because gendered disinformation can take a variety of forms and overlaps between hate speech and more widely understood forms of disinformation (such as so-called 'fake news'), it can often go overlooked and solutions to tackling it often fail to encompass the diversity of forms it can take.

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<sup>13</sup> [https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication\\_faculty\\_pubs/74/](https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/74/)  
<https://demos.co.uk/project/engendering-hate-the-contours-of-state-aligned-gendered-disinformation-online/>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO\\_BRI\(2021\)653644\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO_BRI(2021)653644_EN.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Based on Judson et al, 2020, p. 7, <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/36786/1/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Lucina Di Meo, "Online Threats to Women's Political Participation and The Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them," (Paper presented at the Sixty-Fifth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, October 5-8, 2020), 4.

### 3. Cases of Gendered Disinformation

Gendered disinformation comes in different forms, such as, harmful social media posts and graphics, sexual fabrications, and other forms of conspiracy theories, and is used in different situations and at different places. In this section the BPF zooms in on examples of gendered disinformation that are recognizable and visible, and tries to shed light on the potential direct and indirect impact.

#### Everyday Gendered Disinformation

During the BPF discussions participants raised that many people are facing forms of gendered disinformation in everyday life. Not only those in high profile positions, those taking up engagement very visibly in their communities as rights defenders, or those having or aspiring political careers, are targets of gendered disinformation. Also women and gender diverse people who prefer not being on the barricades, can feel the impact of gendered disinformation, in their daily lives, for example gendered disinformation is used to promote or establish stereotypes.

#### Youth experiences

Plan International recently published a report<sup>17</sup> on how misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women. Some key findings of the report are summarized below:

- Plan International spoke to 26,000 girls and young women across 26 countries about their exposure to false information online: Nine in ten told it has negatively impacted their lives.
- False information affects us all – it is pervasive and inescapable – but for girls and young women, learning about the world and their place in it, it can be devastating. The vile stories told about women in public life – the stereotypes depicted, the struggle to disentangle fact from fiction, opinion from evidence and the assumptions made – all undermine girls’ ability to see themselves as leaders with ideas worth listening to and the ability to change the world.
- The spread of false information online has real life consequences. It is dangerous, it affects girls’ mental health, and it’s yet another thing holding them back.
- Exposure to lies and false information online left one in three (35%) of the girls and young women we spoke to feeling stressed, worried, or anxious. One in five (20%) was left feeling physically unsafe.
- Girls are watching women leaders targeted with malicious rumors and conspiracy theories designed to attack their credibility and shame them into silence. This damages girls’ leadership ambitions.
- One in four (26%) feel less confident to share their views. One in five (18%) stopped engaging in politics or current affairs. And for one in five (19%) it knocked their trust in election results. It is corrosive, undermining girls’ and young women’s confidence to take part in public life.

#### Journalists

Disinformation and online harassment that targets female journalists and media organizations, undermines, drowns out and delegitimizes real news is an increasingly common strategy in political systems in all kinds, from democratic to authoritarian contexts. Coordinated disinformation regularly leverages

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<sup>17</sup> “The Truth Gap, How misinformation and disinformation online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women.”, Plan International, 2021, <https://plan-international.org/publications/truth-gap> (accessed 12 Nov 2021).

online hate and misogyny and is often used to legitimize physical violence. 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.

The chilling effect of such targeted disinformation campaigns – on both the individual journalist as well as other journalists and women in general – is particularly effective if combined with other attacks, such as online harassment and abuse, which is often gendered and aims at silencing women's voices in the public sphere.

A big data analysis of the online violence and smear campaigns targeting recent Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa illustrates the use of gendered disinformation campaigns as part of a broader, common strategy to attack women journalists for being female, for being online, and for speaking truth to power. Thus, gender-based online violence against journalists is closely interlinked with disinformation campaigns aimed at discrediting women, undermining trust in the media and hampering progress towards societal equality.

Also, the reporting on disinformation typically triggers online attacks, with perpetrators instrumentalizing misogynistic hate, smear campaigns and gender-based threats to erode credibility of the media and facts.

Attempts to silence critics and manipulate public opinion by targeting journalists and media outlets undermines the sustainability of independent journalism.

For more on the specific case of gendered disinformation against women journalists, please check below the summary of the learning session on this topic.

## Politicians

In a WIIS blog dated 13<sup>th</sup> September, 2021 and titled “*An overlooked Threat to Democracy? Gendered Disinformation About Female Politicians*”, Ana Blatnik, a Gender and Global Security Program Assistant at Women in International Security (WIIS) explained that, disinformation is gendered if it targets women based on their identity as women. In doing so, rather than directly attacking the policy decisions women make, gender stereotypical characteristics and physical appearance are used instead, to challenge female politicians.

Whenever the subject of online gender-based violence comes up, there are always one or two relevant examples regarding hate speech or other derogatory and discriminatory language being directed toward female and non-binary politicians. As mentioned previously in this report, disinformation strategies can be deployed with the main goal of harming women and gender diverse people as the different speeches may rely on societies take on gender diversity and sexuality<sup>18</sup>, or even entrenched misconceptions and prejudices.

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<sup>18</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO\\_BRI\(2021\)653644\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/653644/EXPO_BRI(2021)653644_EN.pdf)

Recent research conducted in India by Amnesty International<sup>19</sup> and in Brazil by the platform MonitorA<sup>20</sup> have concluded that women are often "*attacked for being what they are – women, black, elderly, transgender –, while men candidates were offended mostly for their professional performance as politicians and public administrators – except for elderly and GBT+ candidates, that were also targets of hate speech and aggressions for those characteristics*".

On that note, this BPF Gender and Digital Rights highlights some of the main outcomes/findings of the broader topic of gender disinformation directed towards female and non-binary politicians:

1. Hate speech against certain communities and genders is still an existing strategy deployed to silence more diverse and less conservative voices and platforms;
2. There is still a lot to be done at the political campaign level in order to (a) suppress attacks towards candidates responsible for exacerbating gendered stereotypes or fostering inequality and oppression; and (b) introducing gender-sensitive standards for political campaigning and politicians<sup>21</sup>;
3. In order to avoid fostering or giving space to sexism, racism, ageism and LGBT phobia, States and social media platforms should work together in developing strategies that work: We need stronger legislations to confront political violence and gendered disinformation, more transparent and meaningful data on how social media platforms have been handling online abuse, as well as more accountability on existing platform reforms.

Gendered disinformation ultimately aims to paint the picture that women are unfit for leadership. It portrays women nominated or assigned higher public offices as unfit/undeserving/incompetent of such a position, which undermines their capabilities to lead. It also creates the notion that such women may have obtained such higher status through sexual acquaintances and not through their own merits. Consequently, this discourages other women that have witnessed such attacks on their fellow women from pursuing political careers or other higher positions.

Gendered disinformation attacks against politicians in particular are often disguised or perceived as 'legitimate political critique' (for instance, inauthentically amplifying and stoking more hateful criticism of a politician's actions) which can make taking action against them more difficult for fears of interfering with political freedom of expression. Yet, data shows that women politicians are attacked both more frequently and more personally than their male counterparts.

## Women's Human Rights Defenders

In a global environment of hostility and intolerance against civil society actors, women's human rights defenders (WHRDs) remain particularly affected by the rise of gendered disinformation in different ways, and these are our five key findings:

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<sup>19</sup> Amnesty International. TROLL PATROL INDIA Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India. 2020. Available at: [https://decoders.blob.core.windows.net/troll-patrol-india-findings/Amnesty International India Troll Patrol India Findings 2020.pdf](https://decoders.blob.core.windows.net/troll-patrol-india-findings/Amnesty%20International%20India%20Troll%20Patrol%20India%20Findings%202020.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> AZMINA MAGAZINE; INTERNETLAB. Monitora: Report on online political violence on the pages and profiles of candidates in the 2020 municipal elections. São Paulo, 2021. Available at: [https://www.internetlab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5P\\_Relatorio\\_MonitorA-ENG.pdf](https://www.internetlab.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/5P_Relatorio_MonitorA-ENG.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Judson, Ellen. Gendered disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat. Friedrich Boll Stiftung. 2021. Available at: [https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat?utm\\_campaign=thinktech\\_6&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=RD+Station&dimension1=democracy#\\_ftn1](https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat?utm_campaign=thinktech_6&utm_medium=email&utm_source=RD+Station&dimension1=democracy#_ftn1)

1. WHRDs are subject to stigmatization and smearing campaigns: well-planned, value-laden and distinctly gendered campaigns are often put forward and popularized by the states in a deliberate way, thus giving the states much plausible deniability. A very common example is the use of political narratives against WHRDs to cast doubt on their nationalism, thereby discrediting their work
2. High levels of threats<sup>22</sup> are ongoing with an offline dimension to the defenders and their communities, and even more so for young women and WHRDs of intersectional identities (non-binary, trans, and lesbians) which can escalate to killings.
3. Disinformation experiences of WHRDs online are treated with rampant impunity from social media companies whose inadequate and unclear content moderation guidelines are undermining the hard-won successes WHRDs are trying to maintain. Social media companies heavily rely on algorithms as an automated system that is unlikely to be fed with culturally-specific and gender-sensitive on-the-ground context. Furthermore, rules around speech moderation do not specify what constitutes hate speech, harassment and how they are being implemented. This resulted in many WHRDs-related content and account takedowns.
4. Access challenges are old news but still of concern for WHRDs, ranging from internet affordability, to legal and administrative burdens to report violations.
5. Failure of protection of WHRDs in jurisdictions where gendered disinformation is not legally recognized as violence. This “laissez-faire” approach is compounded with the rise of laws criminalizing online speech and dissent.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/RU/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23238&LangID=R>

## 4. BPF Learning sessions

The BPF Gender and Digital Rights organized a series of *learning sessions* with invited experts to explore different facets of the issue of gendered disinformation. Summaries of the learning sessions were published in August 2021 and are incorporated below. The Learning sessions cover the following topics:

- Gendered disinformation, a concept under construction
- Disinformation and Freedom of Expression
- Effects of gendered disinformation on the journalist community
- Documenting gendered disinformation facing women leaders
- Gendered disinformation and the anti LGBTQIA+ ideology discourse
- Intersectionality of disinformation
- Gendered disinformation - Impacts and potential roadmaps to solutions

### Gendered disinformation, a concept under construction

**Expert, Debora Albu, Program Coordinator & Researcher, BPF co-facilitator**

Based on BPF learning session I - Recording: [Call I](#), code +ZW6kGwe, [slides](#)

- 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, territory, sexuality).

## Disinformation and Freedom of Expression

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

Based on BPF learning session II (Recording: [Call II](#), code D@&3.sW4, [slides](#))

- 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

**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](http://www.mediatedspeech.com) ; MAG member**

Based on BPF learning session II (Recording: [Call II](#), code D@&3.sW4, [slides](#))

- 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 a 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=VhCIDdO9s54>
  - <https://onlineviolenceresponsehub.org>
  - <https://iwmf.org/programs/online-harassment>

Additional resource: [#SOFJO Resource Guide | OSCE](#) (including several good practice example of tackling online violence against women journalists, often embedded in disinformation campaigns)

## Documenting gendered disinformation facing women leaders

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

*Based on BPF learning session IV (Recording: [Call IV](#), code \$05cmhbK )*

- 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, providing 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](https://issuu.com/migsinstitute/docs/whitepaper_final_version.docx)

## Gendered disinformation and the anti LGBTQIA+ ideology discourse

### **Expert, Victor Giusti**

Based on **GIUSTI, Victor. Como se controla a desinformação nas eleições? O caso do “kit gay”. Dissertação (Mestrado em Direitos Humanos e Cidadania), Universidade de Brasília, Brasília, 2021).**

Gendered disinformation is also perceived in three cases related to the dissemination of “gender ideology” discourse in Latin-American territory. As we look at the experiences of Brazil, Colombia, and Peru, we are

given a better sense of how the expression was articulated to falsely present LGBTQIA+ people as dangerous threats to social order. Although first connected to moral and religious oppositions concerning the demands for sexual and reproductive rights made by the feminist movement in international settings<sup>23</sup>, the anti-gender “slogan”<sup>24</sup> spread among conservative sectors of politics in South America’s countries as soon as they engaged in open discussions about gender and sexual diversity education in schools.<sup>25</sup>

In Brazil, the “ideology” gained traction in 2011, when the Ministry of Education planned the distribution of a pedagogical material designed to help educators to discuss sexual diversity in class and teach about gender identity/sexual orientation-based discrimination<sup>26</sup>. Rapidly nicknamed the “gay kit” by the religious branch of Brazilian Congress, the same material was represented (then, and during the 2018 presidential election) as an excuse of the LGBTQIA+ movement and left-wing Parties to indoctrinate children and teach them how to have sex<sup>27</sup>.

According to some of the pieces of disinformation circulated in 2018, the “kit” included: baby bottles with penis-shaped pacifiers, to be distributed to children aged 5-6 in day care centers<sup>28</sup> (which were actually sold in sex shops<sup>29</sup>); Barbies in versions “drug addict”, “dealer” and “travesti”, intended to “promote” these behaviors (overlooking, for example, that being a “travesti” is not a choice)<sup>30</sup>; and a book called “Le Guide du zizi sexuel”, supposedly designed to “promote pedophilia”<sup>31</sup>, but actually written by a French author, designed to children above 11 years old, and never endorsed by the Ministry of Education as part of its curricular program<sup>32</sup>.

As for the impacts of this, we can mention: (a) that the government’s human rights denunciation channel (“Disque 100”) registered an increase of more than 270% of denounces reporting violence towards LGBTQIA+ people – when comparing October/2018 (one of the busiest months of elections) and the same

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<sup>23</sup> SOUZA, Sandra Duarte de. O gênero da discórdia. A Igreja Católica e a campanha contra os direitos das mulheres na política internacional: uma abordagem a partir das conferências do Cairo e Pequim. *Religare: Revista do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências das Religiões da UFPB*, v. 15, n. 2, p. 483-504, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> JUNQUEIRA, Rogério Diniz. “Ideologia de gênero”: a gênese de uma categoria política reacionária – ou: a promoção dos direitos humanos se tornou uma “ameaça à família natural”? In: RIBEIRO, Paula Regina Costa; MAGALHÃES, Joanalira Corpes (org.). *Debates contemporâneos sobre educação para a sexualidade*. Rio Grande: Ed. da FURG, 2017. p. 25-52.

<sup>25</sup> CAMPANA, Maxilimiliano; MISKOLCI, Richard. “Ideologia de gênero”: notas para a genealogia de um pânico moral contemporâneo. *Sociedade e Estado*, v. 32, p. 573-591, 2017. MENA-LÓPEZ, Maricel; RAMÍREZ ARISTIZÁBAL, Fidel Mauricio. Las falacias discursivas en torno a la ideología de género. *ex aequo*, n. 37, p. 19-31, 2018. MENESES, Daniela. Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas: un estudio de discurso y poder en un grupo de Facebook peruano opuesto a la «ideología de género». *Anthropologica*, v. 37, n. 42, p. 129-154, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> CAMPANA, Maxilimiliano; MISKOLCI, Richard. *Op cit.*

<sup>27</sup> KER, João. *Veja 10 fake news criadas contra a comunidade LGBTQ. Híbrida, 2018?* Available at: <https://revistahibrida.com.br/2018/10/18/10-fake-news-sobre-a-comunidade-lgbt/>. Access on: 20 aug. 2020.

<sup>28</sup> BRASIL. Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. Representação nº 0601530-54.2018.6.00.0000. Decisão liminar. Relator: Min. Sérgio Silveira Banhos, 30 de setembro de 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3pLTAW2>. Access on: 3 feb. 2021.

<sup>29</sup> ESTADÃO VERIFICA. ‘Mamadeiras eróticas’ não foram distribuídas em creches pelo PT. *Estadão*, São Paulo, 28 set. 2018. Available at: <https://politica.estadao.com.br/blogs/estadao-verifica/mamadeiras-eroticas-nao-foram-distribuidas-em-creches-pelo-pt/>. Access on: 13 aug. 2021.

<sup>30</sup> BRASIL. Tribunal Superior Eleitoral. Representação nº 0601601-56.2018.6.00.0000. Relator: Min. Carlos Horbach.

<sup>31</sup> LINO, Adriana. Jair Bolsonaro Detona MEC, falando sobre o kit gay distribuídos nas escolas públicas. *Youtube*, 6 abr. 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOdszPW61UM&t=26s>. Access on: 7 sep. 2020.

<sup>32</sup> GOVERNO FEDERAL. Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos. Secretaria de Direitos Humanos. A verdade sobre o livro de educação sexual citado em vídeo na internet. 14 jan. 2016. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/sdh/noticias/2016/janeiro/a-verdade-sobre-o-livro-de-educacao-sexual-citado-em-video-na-internet>. Access on: 11 apr. 2021.

period of the previous year<sup>33</sup>; (b) the findings of a research conducted by “Gênero e Número”, which stated that more than 90% of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender respondents attested to an increase of violence against their community in 2018<sup>34</sup>; and (c) that the most prejudiced candidate by the disinformation mentioned above<sup>35</sup> was widely known (and discredited) as the “gay kit candidate”.

In Colombia, the “gender ideology” is presented as an enemy in 2016<sup>36</sup>. It starts when the country’s Ministry of Education produces a booklet, in compliance to a decision from Colombia’s Constitutional Court, to guide school’s faculties in revising and adapting their conduct codes (“manuales de convivencia”) to abandon rules that endorse discrimination motivated by different experiences of sexuality and gender. Similarly to the case of Brazil, an outsider material was falsely associated with the booklet; in this case, it was part of a comic book called “In bed with David & Jonathan”, written by a Belgium author, and containing illustrations of a gay relationship<sup>37</sup>.

In addition to that, conservative political figures announced that the Ministry had a “homosexualizing polity”, associating it to the on-going discussions surrounding the agreement to end armed conflicts in Colombia. According to those figures, the agreement was also embedded by the “gay ideology” and should not be approved by the national referendum on it. After manifestations against the so-called ideology, the Presidency, and the peace-agreement, as well as attacks directed to the Minister of Education, Ginna Parody, an openly lesbian woman, the response to the referendum was negative, and Parody stepped down of her position in the government<sup>38</sup>.

Finally, in Peru, cases of gendered disinformation fueled by “gender ideology” also appeared during 2016. Linked to a bigger movement called “Con mis hijos no te metas”, which was the name of a public group on Facebook, the narratives attacked attempts made by the Ministry of Education to advance lessons about gender, identity, and sexual education in schools<sup>39</sup>. Repeating the same patterns as its Latin-American counterparts, Peru saw the increase of a political conservative discourse according to which the “ideology” was dangerous as it allowed boys to choose to be girls and perceive this as normal.<sup>40</sup>

On the Facebook group, LGBTQIA+ people were said to have pathologies (including HIV/aids), the idea of “gay conversion” was accepted, presenting heterosexuality as something to pursue, and homosexuality was associated with sin, motivating a discourse of salvation that put God as the path to change<sup>41</sup>. Moreover,

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<sup>33</sup> GOVERNO FEDERAL. MINISTÉRIO DA MULHER, DA FAMÍLIA E DOS DIREITOS HUMANOS. Disque 100 registra quase três mil violações contra a população LGBT. Brasília, 27 jun. 2019. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/mdh/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/2019/junho/disque-100-registra-quase-tres-mil-violacoes-contr-a-populacao-lgbt> . Access on: 13 sep. 2020.

<sup>34</sup> MENA, Fernanda. Mais da metade dos LGBT diz ter sofrido violência desde as eleições. Folha de S. Paulo, São Paulo, 20 mar. 2019. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2019/03/mais-da-metade-dos-lgbt-diz-ter-sofrido-violencia-desde-as-eleicoes.shtml> . Access on: 13 sep. 2020.

<sup>35</sup> DOURADO, Tatiana Maria Silva Galvão. Fake news na eleição presidencial de 2018 no Brasil. Tese (Doutorado em Comunicação e Cultura Contemporâneas), Faculdade de Comunicação da Universidade Federal da Bahia, Salvador, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Available at: <https://www.elheraldo.co/nacional/no-es-cierto-que-estemos-imponiendo-la-llamada-ideologia-de-genero-gina-parody-278328> . Access on: 13 oct. 2021.

<sup>37</sup> MENA-LÓPEZ, Maricel; RAMÍREZ ARISTIZÁBAL, Fidel Mauricio. Op cit.

<sup>38</sup> Idem.

<sup>39</sup> MENESES, Daniela. Op cit.

<sup>40</sup> Idem.

<sup>41</sup> Idem.

there were some very specific publications that associated natural phenomenon occurrences, such as El Niño, in 2017, to a “divine punishment directed to the government for promoting ‘gender ideology’”<sup>42</sup>.

Considering these three cases, we point out to the need of realizing how some pieces of disinformation rely on gender identity and sexual orientation stereotypes to create narratives that justify cutting off public policies designed to educate people about diversity. Weaponizing gendered and sexualized discourses second to which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, trans people, and so on, threaten social order for being sinful, pathological, or, most prominently, hypersexualized, “gender ideology” is repeatedly articulated to falsely draw on political demands made by the LGBTQIA+ and feminist movements<sup>43</sup> (and by people associated with them).

These narratives are also linked to the risks that gendered disinformation poses in terms of security and human rights<sup>44</sup>. Because depicting sexual and gender diversity education in schools as something immoral, threatening, and dangerous, reinforces the association of these tropes to LGBTQIA+ people, making them more likely to face discriminatory encounters (as mentioned in the case of Brazil and Peru). Furthermore, by presenting this political demand as something unfit for public discourse, these narratives feed the idea that non-cisheteronormative identities should stay hidden, excluded from national education policies (in specific) and from democratic deliberation (at large).

## Intersectionality of disinformation

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

*Based on BPF learning session IV (Call IV, code \$05cmhbK )*

- 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.

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<sup>42</sup> Idem. p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> Further discussion on this topic can be elaborated taking into consideration the cases of Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Ecuador, France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and many other countries mentioned by Rogério Junqueira as having campaigns against “gender ideology”. JUNQUEIRA, Rogério. Op cit.

<sup>44</sup> JUDSON, Ellen. Gendered disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat. Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Brussels, 9 jul. 2021. Available at: [https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat?utm\\_campaign=thinktech\\_6&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=RD+Station&dimension1=democracy#\\_ftn1](https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat?utm_campaign=thinktech_6&utm_medium=email&utm_source=RD+Station&dimension1=democracy#_ftn1) . Access on: 28 jul. 2021.

- In the near future, Gendered disinformation beyond a binary conception of gender, research and conversations should also include gender non conforming identities.

## Gendered disinformation - Impacts and potential roadmaps to solutions

### expert:

**Ellen Judson**, Senior Researcher at CASM , Demos, <https://demos.co.uk/research-area/casm/>

Based on BPF learning session V ([Call V](#), code 8U&tb93%)

- 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 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>

## 5. Existing responses, emerging best practices, and recommendations

While gender disinformation is prevalent and growing, it is still a concept under construction. Being an issue that is rapidly expanding and developing, there are no clearly identified best practices. Rather what has been observed is that most nations and communities are trying to respond or take action to address the issue based on their experience and resources.

Ana Blatnik's blog (An Overlooked Threat To Democracy? Gendered Disinformation About Female Politicians – WIIS)<sup>45</sup> suggests the following that can be considered as next steps to addressing gendered disinformation:

1. Find fact-checking websites relevant to your region and topics of interest. For example, if interested in the European Union politics, EU Fact Check looks at the accuracy of political statements made about current issues.
2. If available, always check multiple sources on the same topic when reading the news.
3. Look into and, if possible, support organizations that recognize that gendered disinformation is a problem and advocate for solutions. An example of such is the EU Disinfo Lab, which has studied and written about gendered disinformation campaigns to highlight the issue.
4. Research the ways in which you could bring up the issue to relevant authorities in your country of residence and challenge your public representatives on what they have done to address disinformation and to support women politicians who are the targets of disinformation campaigns.
5. Most importantly, continue to educate yourself about gender stereotypes and biases so you can recognize them when interacting with news about women politicians online, especially in election periods. The WIIS website has a Resources page that may be a good starting point in that regard.

However, the primary burden of tackling gendered disinformation needs to fall on the social media platforms amplifying the harms rather than the women targeted by such campaigns and the social media users viewing them. Addressing gendered disinformation requires a multistakeholder approach. A multistakeholder approach ensures that we work towards a balance of rights in particular disinformation and freedom of expression, as well as that all stakeholders involved are part of the process.

One effective example of this approach can be seen in the authoring of a letter from the Congressional Women's Caucus, spearheaded by Representative Jackie Speier (D-CA) and signed by 100 U.S. women lawmakers and current and former legislators from around the world, to Facebook Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg. The letter called on them to take decisive action and enforce existing platform regulations to stop the spread of excessive and increasing gendered disinformation on their platforms.

Action against gendered disinformation must not only be reactive, or focused on how an individual 'ought' to respond to a campaign against them. We need much more proactive action to reduce the risk of gendered disinformation occurring and prevent it from being amplified, and to better support those individuals put at risk because of it.

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<sup>45</sup> <https://wiisglobal.org/an-overlooked-threat-to-democracy-gendered-disinformation-about-female-politicians/>

Potential actions that can be taken by social media platforms to tackle this issue focus on accountability and transparency, and should include, among others:

1. Increased transparency of algorithmic preferences on social media platforms;
2. Increased transparency surrounding content moderation policies, practices, and outcomes;
3. Greater diversity and cultural training of content moderators, as well as the inclusion of local experts;
4. Improved risk assessment practices in content development;
5. More accountability around adherence to existing platform standards and codes of conduct, as well as tangible action to make such protocols less vague and more enforceable.

Ellen Judson's article 'Gendered disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat', explains how gendered disinformation impacts individuals and societies, and the challenges in combating it. and sets out a plan of action for governments, platforms, media and civil society.

<https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat> .

## 6. Takeaways and Conclusion from the 2021 BPF Gender and Digital Rights and the BPF session at IGF 2021

Disinformation is a multifaceted, and evolving issue and one that sits at the crossroads of ICTs, human rights and governance. Much of the available discourse focuses on the gendered impacts of disinformation, just like this year's BPF thematic report. The contours of disinformation at the governance level remains equally important yet blurred and particularly challenging. What is it that makes disinformation hard to handle, mitigate and prevent?

BPF Gender and Digital Rights session at IGF 2021,  
Thursday 9 December 2021, 9:30-11:00 CET (8:30-10:00 UTC).

<https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2021-main-session-bpf-gender-and-digital-rights>

Transcript: <https://www.intgovforum.org/en/content/igf-2021---day-3---main-session-bpf-gender-and-digital-rights---raw>

Video:

<https://youtu.be/vTgdE987KRA>

The BPF on Gender and Digital Rights held an open roundtable discussion at IGF 2021 to get a deeper and practical understanding of what is “beneath the disinformation lid”. Key Takeaways of this discussion are summarised below:

1) Gendered disinformation has an impact on the participation of women in public spaces. The experience of being the target of gendered disinformation or witnessing it happen to others has a chilling effect on their participation online. It hinders the political equity of groups for example.

**Action item:**

There is a need to engage all political players, in particular political parties, to improve awareness of the existence of gendered disinformation and the understanding of the impact of gendered disinformation for reaching political equity.

2. Gendered disinformation is not a new phenomenon; however, the social media and use of technology facilitates and amplifies the spread of disinformation. There is a need to connect gendered disinformation to already existing issues. The term itself must capture already existing practices of disinformation such as myths and urban legends.

**Action item:**

There is a need to connect gendered disinformation to other human rights violations such as freedom of association or safety of marginalised groups. Reaching out, engaging, and exchanging experiences with groups who have already been dealing with disinformation can benefit all.

3. There is an urgent need to develop ethical guidelines, to compile context-related responses and quick action responses. These should be accompanied with capacity building efforts to tackle online gendered disinformation as it happens.

**Action item:**

The multistakeholder process provides a mechanism where solutions beyond legislation and regulation can be developed and propagated. It would also see stakeholders recommending solutions based on their role in the digital ecosystem

4. Best practices for dealing with gendered disinformation need to be developed urgently, adapted and contextualised, and internalised and supported by governments.

**Action item:**

The IGF and other UN Forums can play an important role to involve and commit stakeholders to take action.

## Annexes

### Annex I. Reports by the IGF BPF Gender and Access 2015-2020

#### **IGF 2020 - Gender at the Internet Governance Forum.**

The BPF conduct an assessment of Internet-related policy processes and spaces through a feminist approach, to determine whether and how they protect and foster participation of women and gender-diverse people, particularly young ones. The focus was placed on Internet-related policy processes and spaces that address issues related to violence, harm, pleasure and consent online.

Report [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/5004/2371](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/5004/2371)

#### **IGF 2019 - Beyond Access: Women, transgender and gender non-conforming people's participation in the digital economy.**

[outline]

Report [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/5004/1787](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/5004/1787)

#### **IGF 2018 - Impact of supplementary models of connectivity in enabling meaningful Internet access for women and gendered non-binary persons.**

[outline]

Report [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/5004/1455](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/5004/1455)

#### **IGF 2017 - Unique challenges for unique women. - An exploration of the unique needs and challenges women from diverse communities face in gaining meaningful Internet access.**

[outline]

Report [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/3406/1197](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/3406/1197)

#### **IGF 2016 - Gender Access: overcoming barriers to enable women's meaningful Internet access.**

[outline]

Report [https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot\\_download/3406/437](https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/3406/437)

#### **IGF 2015 - Best practice forum on online abuse and gender-based violence against women.**

[outline]

Report <https://www.intgovforum.org/cms/documents/best-practice-forums/623-bpf-online-abuse-and-gbv-against-women/file>

### Annex II. BPF 2021 Proposal

- Link [https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot\\_download/11178/2436](https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/filedepot_download/11178/2436)

## Annex III. BPF Gender and Digital rights kick-off survey on the working definition of 'gendered disinformation'

Survey period 15-30 May 2021 - respondents #10

*The term "Gendered disinformation" can be used to describe information activities (creating, sharing, disseminating content) which: a) Attacks or undermines people on the basis of their gender; b) Weaponises gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives."*

Please provide your feedback on the above definition. Does it correspond to your understanding of the concept of gendered disinformation? Would you suggest additions or amendments ?

- It matches my definition as well
- I can work with this definition, but possible detailing of b.) might be useful as "weaponising" as a term whilst often used as an inflammatory can also apply in a positive context...
- Yes, I do agree with the definition as it attacks or undermines people on the basis of their gender. Most of the cases women are the victims. In every place, work, social, even in the home by the family members too. For option b), my personal opinion in few cases I have found less of weaponizes gendered narratives to promote political, social or economic objectives as media including social media are now very active.
- It is good.
- Yes, it corresponds to my concept of gendered disinformation.
- Yes, however the (b) is unclear as it would mean a range of objectives, however without a clear intent. Narratives that promote political, social and economic objectives cover a huge range, we need to classify this more clearly.
- Yes, 'til some point. In the first part I will write it this way "...on the basis of their gender identities and expressions"; and in the second I will add "...to promote political, social, cultural, artistic or economic objectives."
- The suggested definition above does not necessarily separate between disinformation and hate speech. Also, as per the difference between the definitions of mis and disinformation, intent (despite the vagueness of the term) could be used in defining 'gendered disinformation'

-> Alternative definitions - other definitions of 'gendered disinformation' can be submitted below. (please add references if they are copied from research, articles or blogs).

- Gendered disinformation can be understood as the dissemination of false or misleading information attacking women (especially political leaders, journalists and public figures), basing the attack on their identity as women (e.g. Jankowicz, 2017; Barker and Jurasz, 2019; Di Meo, 2019; Stabile et al., 2019). The techniques for diffusing gendered disinformation are diverse and include misogynist comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualisation and the diffusion of graphic contents, online harassment and cyber-attacks. Gendered disinformation has the effect of perpetuating a negative perception of women in society: it undermines women's credibility in occupying positions of power ,discourages women from participating in the public debate, and serves to silence women in general. This research focuses specifically on misogynistic

disinformation, with the recognition that gendered disinformation is a wider concept.

<https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/misogyny-and-misinformation:-an-analysis-of-gendered-disinformation-tactics-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

- I agree with the above definition, I think you could also highlight that, Gendered disinformation online exists at the intersection of disinformation with online violence, such as abuse and harassment. It is from the same source - Engendering hate

*BPF workplan - The BPF intends to explore the concept of 'gendered disinformation' and map the strategies and actions to halt the spread of gendered disinformation and build a less toxic online environment for women and gender diverse groups.*

-> What are specific needs in the community, related to gendered disinformation, and what should the BPF do or focus on? What could be useful outputs of the BPF discussions?

- Gender roles, gender sensitivity and it's impact on all persons
- The community requires more initiative on awareness, education, etc. BPF to continue to emphasize on this issue and highlight boldly.
- Gendered disinformation distracts people from the policy issues to undesirable dimensions. Repeated posts will result in personal attacks and spread of false news. Subjected women will not have resources, time and energies to withstand it and counter them
- Therefore, BPF, as a brand for Best Practices should counter these menacing campaigns and neutralize them by posting the true facts. It is possible by having committed and active BPF Ambassadors / Members / Volunteers in all parts of the globe.
- Effective mitigation of (processes, skills and tools) gendered disinformation.
- Impacts of gendered disinformation, regulation - who is accountable, legal frameworks and accountability. Profitable nature
- As a teenager who is a regular user of the internet, I believe there is a lot of gendered misinformation prevailing in communities run by younger members of our society. For example, this can be seen especially in the 'meme' culture where often underneath jokes, lay misogynic views and opinions. Due to the pandemic, the majority of the teenagers spend their time online whether it is online school or to stay in touch with their friends. I believe BPF discussions should also bring this issue to light on how we can protect spaces on the internet which are occupied by youngsters. It'll be beneficial to talk about gender representation and acceptance on social media particularly popular among children these days.
- A set of recommendations on how we can as gender diverse people disinformation about us, also some kind of campaign about it. I'm thinking of demanding the release of the content management policies of the most popular social media platforms.
- Some questions to explore: fine-line between hate speech and disinformation; influence of gender representation in media on the creation and circulation of 'gendered disinformation', cultural and geographical differences in approaches to and experiences with 'gendered disinformation', if - and why- 'gendered disinformation' is a national security question - and what are the potential risks and benefits of 'securitising' 'gendered disinformation'

It is essential for the discussions to arrive at tangible policies. Given the differences in definition of gender and approaches to gender equality in different countries, cultural and contextual sensitivity emerges as a question. Following a mapping exercise to understand dominant the issues and countermeasures in different countries and contexts, issue-based working groups could be formed and different working groups could meet on regular basis to share their notes. It is essential to have a diverse representation in each working group and set clear goals (e.g., workshops, working papers, round-table discussions etc) and timelines.

*Expertise and resources - The BPF is looking for initiatives, specialist, and reference works that could be relevant for this year's BPF. We're in particular interested in expertise and initiatives on gendered disinformation as well as disinformation in general.*

Feedback on this section of the survey is not shown in the report as it contains personal information including direct email addresses shared by 3rd persons.

## References

- [Gendered Disinformation Campaigns, an Attack on Democracy](#)
- [An Overlooked Threat To Democracy? Gendered Disinformation About Female Politicians – WIIS](#)
- [Gendered disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat](#)
- [Gendered Disinformation, Democracy, and the Need for a New Digital Social Contract](#)
- <https://www.power3point0.org/2020/05/01/why-disinformation-targeting-women-undermines-democratic-institutions/>
- [https://issuu.com/migsinstitute/docs/whitepaper\\_final\\_version.docx](https://issuu.com/migsinstitute/docs/whitepaper_final_version.docx)
- <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/11/30/tackling-online-abuse-and-disinformation-targeting-women-in-politics-pub-83331>
- <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/the-gendered-disinformation-playbook-in-germany-is-a-warning-for-europe/>
- [Gendered disinformation and what can be done to counter it](#)
- [Addressing Online Misogyny and Gendered Disinformation: A How-To Guide](#)
- [Gendered disinformation is a national security problem](#)
- [https://www.parlamericas.org/uploads/documents/Presentation\\_SandraPepera\\_PDF.pdf](https://www.parlamericas.org/uploads/documents/Presentation_SandraPepera_PDF.pdf)