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MONETIZING MISOGYNY

**Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining
of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally**

Lucina Di Meco

February 2023

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LUCINA DI MECO

Lucina Di Meo is a gender equality expert and women's rights advocate recognized by Apolitical as one of the 100 Most Influential People in Gender Policy for her work on gendered disinformation. She's the co-founder of #ShePersisted, a global initiative addressing gendered disinformation and online attacks against women in politics through research, support to women leaders and advocacy. Lucina is the author of "[#ShePersisted: Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World](#)," a study of the relationship between women in politics and social media in 30 countries. Her work has been featured on the New York Times, the BBC, Time Magazine, the Washington Post, Politico, El País, The Hill and Voice of America. Lucina has written on gendered disinformation and social media harms for the Brookings Institution, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Council of Foreign Relations, the National Endowment for Democracy, Ms. Magazine and the Women's Media Center, among others. Throughout her career, Lucina has worked with a wide range of international organizations and nonprofits, including Vital Voices, the Wilson Center, International IDEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UNDP and UN Women. Lucina is Vice President of Room to Read, a global nonprofit working to end gender inequality through education, and an Advisory Board Member of Fund Her, an organization working to elect progressive women to state legislatures in the United States.

A special thank you goes to Kristina Wilfore for her invaluable support and thought partnership in the design, implementation and editing of this research and all the case studies. I'm forever grateful for her integrity, brilliant vision, steady heart and smart strategic choices in co-founding and co-leading the #ShePersisted initiative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

#ShePersisted is fortunate to take inspiration from leading activists, experts and organizations who both tacitly and directly contribute to our efforts to tackle gendered disinformation globally. This study would not have been possible without the support of key individuals, whose important voices helped shape this work and guide our research. Thank you to my brilliant research partners and co-authors **Nicoletta Apolito** for the Italy case study, **Sarah Hesterman** for the Hungary and Tunisia case studies, **Denise Hirao** and **Kristina Wilfore** for the Brazil case study and to the co-author of the India case study, who elected to stay anonymous. We are especially grateful to our interviewees **Emma Krasznahorkai, Eva Bognar, Kim Scheppele, Zita Gurmai, Ágnes Vadai, Boudour Lamouchi, Henda Gafsi, Faten Kallel, Marc Owen Jones, Marwa Fatafta, Bochra Belhaj Hmida, Swati Chaturvedi, Priyanka Chaturvedi, Angellica Aribam, Shalini Joshi, Arti Raghavan, Ruchi Gupta, Monica Cirinnà, Maria Elena Boschi, Alessandra Moretti, Valeria Fedeli, Laura Boldrini, Costanza Sciubba Caniglia, Talíria Petrone, Natália Leão, Patrícia Campos Mello, Erika Hilton, Laura Tresca, Cailin Crockett** and **Elena Musi** for volunteering to share with us your experiences and expertise. We

also want to thank **H.R. Venkatesh, Maurizio Corte, Sara Habachi, Keerti Rajagopalan, Debora Albu, Paula Silveira Orlando, Paula Martins** and **Flávia Biroli** for serving as peer reviewers, and **Marius Dragomir, Anna Fejós, Hanène Zbiss, Lilia Labidi, Maria Giovanna Sessa, Giorgia Serughetti, Alaphia Zoyab, Sonja Lokar, Irene Pasquetto** and **Natalia Mori** for serving as both interviewees and peer reviewers. Their participation in this research has been invaluable and has allowed us to identify the patterns and motives of gendered disinformation in our five focus countries in relation to regression on women's rights and democratic backsliding. We also want to acknowledge and thank **Marguerite Berger, Cristina Biasini, Julie Hughes** and Sarah Hesterman for their attentive support in copyediting; **Phumzile van Damme, Hafsat Abiola** and **Manira Alva** for their insights and advice; and **Ricardo Cuenca** for his wonderfully creative and patient work in designing these studies. Finally, we extend our deepest gratitude to the **Wallace Global Fund** and **Porticus** for championing this research and ensuring its funding: this study would not have been possible without their support.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital media was initially perceived as a welcome tool for liberation and democracy, yet it's increasingly becoming a tool for repression and a weapon used against women in politics, activists and journalists all over the world.

While social media companies have not invented sexism, or authoritarianism, they have been providing illiberal actors new, exceptionally powerful tools to attack citizens and undermine human rights and democracy, further marginalizing those voices they find threatening.

As noted by Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks: "misogyny and authoritarianism are not just common comorbidities but mutually reinforcing ills."¹ A well-funded, transnational movement has been at work during the last twenty years to backslide women's rights and undermine democracy globally.² Since women are on the frontlines of the fight to protect the most essential rights and liberal values in many countries, their voices represent a threat to authoritarians and illiberal actors everywhere. Therefore, weaponizing social media to silence them is one of the most effective ways to undermine those efforts and erode democratic institutions. Things are getting worse, as many of these authoritarian leaders and malign actors have taken advantage of major events such as the global COVID-19 pandemic to crush opponents and shrink the space available for democratic activism, while digital platforms are shirking their responsibilities for the situation they contributed to creating.³

Over the last five years, we have interviewed and partnered with over one hundred women political leaders and activists all over the world, and heard over and over again how they were all facing large volumes of online abuse and violence. Many of them were targeted through gendered disinformation campaigns, building on gender biases, deployed in a coordinated manner and designed to undermine them and their civic or political agendas.

Most women interviewed indicated that the most vicious online attacks occurred when they were working to protect and advance women's rights and human rights, particularly those of refugees,

immigrants and ethnic, religious or sexual minorities, or when denouncing government corruption.

This research aims to understand the patterns, impact and modus operandi of gendered disinformation campaigns against women in politics in Brazil, Hungary, India, Italy and Tunisia.

The case studies explore how gendered disinformation has been used by political movements, and at times the government itself, to undermine women's political participation, and to weaken democratic institutions and human rights. Crucially, the research also looks at the responsibilities and responses that both state actors and digital platforms have taken - or most often, failed to take - to address this issue. Despite the regional and cultural diversity of the countries analyzed, several trends and patterns emerge related to gendered disinformation:

01. Gendered disinformation, paired with online abuse and violence, is a pervasive problem faced by women

in politics across the globe and represents a very significant barrier to their political participation and freedom of expression. Building on sexist stereotypes and disseminated with malign intent, gendered disinformation campaigns in every context identified have a chilling effect on the women they target, often leading to political violence, hate and the deterring of young women from considering a political career.

Disturbingly, we found that vicious online attacks target not only women in politics, but their families also, with rape threats against their young children becoming an ever more common and deeply disturbing phenomenon.

02. Gendered disinformation should be treated as an early warning system

for both backsliding on women's rights and the erosion of democratic principles and institutions; when it is carried out by foreign malign actors to exploit divisions in society, it's also a significant national security threat. When autocratic leaders are in power, gendered disinformation is often used by state-aligned actors to undermine women opposition leaders, as well as women's rights and democracy. Gendered disinformation also represents a national security problem, as it's frequently employed by malign actors like Russia to exercise foreign influence under the pretext of defending what are sometimes framed as "traditional values."

04. Social media platforms have failed to protect their users

or to deliver their early promises of being an equalizing and democratizing force. The way the major digital platforms are designed is largely responsible for the current hellscape experienced by women online. Harmful narratives are boosted and amplified through algorithms that make such content sticky and often viral, through recommender systems that are built to maximize attention and features that facilitate its rapid and widespread distribution. In our countries of study, we saw how platforms have repeatedly failed to act in tackling abusive and disinformative content against women political leaders.

Methodology

These findings are a direct result of the combination of desk research, some very targeted social media monitoring of posts including the names of women leaders on Twitter and Facebook, and numerous interviews with local women's rights activists, women in politics and digital monitoring experts. In the case of Brazil and Italy, we were also able to use data analytics provided for #ShePersisted by *Instituto de Tecnologia e Sociedade do Rio (ITS Rio)* using the software bot Pegabot, and *Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali Guido Carli (LUISS)* through digital ethnography.⁴


03. Women who come from traditionally marginalized sections of society are made even more vulnerable.

Women with intersecting identities are the target of some of the most violent, vicious gendered disinformation and online hate campaigns which have racist, in addition to sexist, undertones.

05. While there is no silver bullet to address gendered disinformation,

there are policies and practices that can support addressing this problem and in-depth, targeted research is needed to test and refine them. As Big Tech is spending large sums of money on lobbying to protect their business model, it's particularly important for philanthropic organizations to fund independent research and programming, carried out by organizations which are financially independent from Big Tech, and therefore have the ability to speak truth to power.

Importantly, this study also builds on learnings from #ShePersisted's previous work, including the many digital resilience workshops, trainings and in-depth conversations carried out over the last three years with dozens of brave women in politics and political activists from over 50 countries around the globe.⁵ Despite the hate campaigns, online abuse and threats, they persist and refuse to be silenced. This study - and our work - finds inspiration in their courage, resilience and commitment to protect democracy.



“There is a degree of aggression and toxicity that you don’t see in real-world encounters.”

Gendered Disinformation as a Barrier to Women’s Political Participation and Freedom of Expression

GENDERED DISINFORMATION AS A BARRIER

Lawyer Cynthia Khoo coined the umbrella term “technology-facilitated gender-based violence” (TFGBV). This includes a spectrum of activities and behaviors, including both online GBV and gendered disinformation, which are often thriving on the “manosphere,”

an informal network of websites, forums and social media influencers promoting the concept of the “alpha male” and the embracement of intense ideological misogyny.⁶ According to Ms. Khoo, digital platforms are a central player in perpetuating violence, abuse, or harassment against both cis and trans women and girls because they are providing new and efficient mechanisms for abusive users to engage in TFGBV.⁷

As **Arti Raghavan**, a lawyer at Bombay’s High Court, puts it:



“social media just doesn’t simply mirror the structures of the offline world. There is a degree of aggression and toxicity that you don’t see in real world encounters.”

ARTI RAGHAVAN

Large social media platforms should be looked at as polluters operating in a high-risk enterprise that has an identifiable and detrimental impact, and they should have to pay for such an impact.”⁸

Of the different types of online attacks against women, gendered disinformation deserves specific attention for its specificities and harmful impact on democracy and thus “should be defined as such to allow social media platforms to develop effective responses.”⁹ **According to Nobel Prize winning journalist Maria Ressa:**

“gendered disinformation is a new threat and is taking a significant toll on the mental health and physical safety of women, girls, trans, and LGBTQ+ people all over the world.”¹⁰

#ShePersisted works to address gendered disinformation manifesting as the spread of deceptive or inaccurate information targeting highly visible women, such as political leaders, journalists, activists and other public figures.

According to **Kristina Wilfore**, a global democracy activist and co-founder of #ShePersisted, “gendered disinformation campaigns build on, and are rooted in, deeply set misogynistic frameworks and gender biases that portray masculine characteristics as those fit for leadership while painting women leaders as inherently **untrustworthy** (insinuating a woman is dishonest or not trustable is a tried and true attack), **unqualified** (one of the biggest barriers women face when seeking office), **unintelligent** (tropes about women as dumb and unfit for the job are a prominent feature of gendered disinformation, made worse with objectifying sexualized content), and **unlikable** (which for women can be the death knell of their campaign).”¹¹

Those who think that this is just the cost of doing politics for everyone, or a “women’s issue” with no implications for democracy, are simply wrong on three different counts.

Firstly, women in politics are often targeted more by online hate and disinformation than men.

Research undertaken by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue to analyze the scale and nature of online abuse targeting Congressional candidates during the 2020 U.S. federal elections found that female candidates were up to three times more likely than men to be abused on Twitter.¹²

Our own study following four months of the 2020 U.S. Democratic Party presidential primaries revealed that women candidates were attacked more often than men candidates - and more often by accounts that were likely to be inauthentic, showing signs of coordination. Later on, evidence surfaced that a coordinated campaign of disinformation and harassment was at work against then-Vice President-Elect Kamala Harris throughout the 2020 election cycle.¹³ Lies were disseminated about her record as a prosecutor alongside other claims that used some of the tritest and oldest storylines of what Eleanor Herman ironically refers to as the "Misogynist's Handbook."¹⁴ Even in Finland, one of the most gender egalitarian countries in the world, recent studies observed that women ministers received a disproportionate number of abusive messages, most of them deeply gendered and sexist.¹⁵

Secondly, the impact of the attacks is incommensurably greater on women in politics.

As newcomers to the political field, women already face challenges in establishing themselves as credible candidates, and oftentimes the impact of a fake story or doctored image becomes much harder to recover from.¹⁶ Gendered disinformation unleashes hate campaigns that come with terrifying, and at times lethal, consequences for women in politics, who are already experiencing rising violence and attacks around the world.¹⁷ As pointed out in Demos' 2020 study, "gendered disinformation is not just false information - it uses highly emotive and value laden content to try to undermine its targets," weaponizing harassment against women in public life, and "seeks impact primarily at the political level, though can also cause serious harm at the personal level."¹⁸

Things are only getting worse. In a personal interview, Indian parliamentarian **Priyanka Chaturvedi** told us: "as the world and the operations turned to digital space, the incidents and the severity of hate attacks against women particularly women in politics, journalists and feminist activists, increased. As more women took to social media platforms to raise concerns, the level of abuse and insults shifted drastically."¹⁹

At times, online threats turn into physical violence and even political murder, as sexist attitudes and beliefs have been found to be the factors most strongly associated with the support for violent extremism.²⁰ This was tragically the case for Jo Cox, a British Member of Parliament who was killed by a far-right activist, after having been a victim of repeated online harassment and threats.²¹



According to Italian Member of Parliament Maria Elena Boschi, this kind of violence "risks erecting a wall for the youngest and leads to a distance from politics. I don't consider it a drawback of the trade or a downside. For me it's just a shame."²²

MARIA ELENA BOSCHI

The majority of women experiencing these attacks report that they took a very heavy toll on their mental health, their activism and their willingness and ability to express themselves online.²³

Thirdly, the impact of gendered disinformation goes far beyond the women who are directly targeted, and weakens democracy and women's rights.

Tech-facilitated gender-based violence and gendered disinformation change social norms, by providing new strength to misogynistic language and narratives that had been latent in society, disseminating and normalizing them at scale.²⁴ According to Karla Mantilla, the online "gendertrolling" of women, particularly women political opponents and journalists, is becoming an ever more common feature of right-wing movements, and must therefore be understood as a deliberate strategy to silence them and "keep them in their place."²⁵

Through our research, we saw how state-led gendered disinformation campaigns have been used to silence and deter women in politics from speaking out, stifling their calls for better governance in Hungary, India, Brazil and Tunisia, in some cases with the aid of a "cyber militia," in addition to ordinary internet users.²⁶ In Italy, multiple women we interviewed expressed how some political parties deliberately use social media to unleash hate campaigns and online harassment against political opponents, particularly women.

It's not only the women who are the direct targets of these attacks that are weakened, but what these women stand for and in many ways embody: women's equal rights, particularly sexual and reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, liberal values and inclusive, diverse democracies.

Throughout all the case studies, it's clear that online abuse and gendered disinformation primarily and most viciously targets women leaders who are demanding accountability as politicians, journalists and women's rights activists, and who are speaking in defense of women's rights and liberal, democratic values.

According to **Monica Cirinnà**, an Italian politician and Senator,



"the attacks are more severe when [women in politics] talk about the rights over their own bodies" and "gender equalities."²⁷

MONICA CIRINNÀ

Attacks against women in politics often follow similar patterns, such as thorough character attacks aimed at putting into question their patriotism and their morality: targets are framed as foreign agents who are used and manipulated by what are perceived as enemies of the state, secretly plotting for the destruction of the nation and its traditional values.

Below are some illustrative examples from our analysis of how gendered disinformation has been viciously deployed against women leaders and political activists in our countries of study. A deeper analysis of these examples and their context is provided in the individual country reports. A necessary caveat is that while this analysis represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation in the country, wide scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels over an extended period of time would be needed to gather more evidence and achieve a more comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon and the malign actors behind it.



BOCHRA BELHAJ HMIDA is a lawyer and politician, heading Tunisia's Individual Freedoms and Equality Commission, who has received widespread recognition for her advocacy of women's rights, family law and LGBTQIA+ issues.²⁸ Ms. Belhaj Hmida has been the target of multiple gendered disinformation campaigns, such as those framing her as corrupted and unpatriotic for reportedly "misleading" Tunisian women into false feminism and falsely claiming she wanted to penalize the traditional practice of circumcision.²⁹ These campaigns were followed by large waves of online violence, including death threats, even incited by well-known public figures.³⁰ For example, in 2018, a radical Islamist preacher called for the public stoning of Ms. Belhaj Hmida and the commission members on Facebook to "purify" the country.³¹ In an interview that year, Ms. Belhaj Hmida declared that "almost every ten minutes, there is a post that calls for murder and spreads disinformation to arouse a popular and violent movement against our work."³² In 2020, Ms. Belhaj Hmida accused MP Abir Moussi's husband of "keeping a Facebook page in her name, the publications of which have caused her harm and represent a threat."³³ The following year, she was sentenced to six months in prison for accusing a former government official of corruption, but stated she intended to appeal.³⁴



Voici pourquoi Bochra Haj Hmida veut imposer au peuple Tunisien son programme Anti - Islam

Translated from French by Google

This is why Bochra Haj Hmida wants to impose her Anti-Islam program on the Tunisian people



September 27, 2020 · 🌐

Bochra Belhaj Hmida, as Sonnia b, Toumia said: "li pipil, li grand pipil tinisien" will never forgive you for your hypocrisy and your shenanigans to you and your fellows from Nidaa, Tahy , 9alb, Joumhour, ElAmal and other fake tokens.

We, the vast majority of the people acknowledge having discovered your true nature. You are dangerous dictators, sellouts to Turks and Qataris.

In the future it is your right to criticize anyone, but do so with common sense, real arguments and not with lies.

A word of advice, you are politically toast, so stay at home... Ditto for all your fellow human beings.



Like



Comment



Share

Examples of accusations claiming Ms. Belhaj Hmida is corrupt, anti-Islam, unpatriotic and influenced by foreign powers.

BOCHRA BELHAJ HMIDA
Photo credit: Wikimedia Commons



January 21, 2022 · 🌐

Kunhalmi Ágnes az MSZP-s ostobája kipoisztolta, hogy covid-dal kórházba került. A tesztje pozitív lett és erős tüdőfájdalmi vannak. A halálos ágyáról befeszített melltartóban és a haját szépen befésülve, maszkban jelentkezett be. Az ágyról a fejét felemelve nézett szembe a kamerával. Bizonyára a tüdőfájdalmairól megfedkezett, ugyanis ha lettek volna, akkor az adott testhelyzetet biztosan nem kereste volna. Ágika testét csövekkel telepakolták ugyan, de nem tisztázott, hogy erre miért volt szükség. Ugyanis a mögötte lévő betegfigyelő monitoron jól látszik, hogy Ágika testhőmérséklete 36.2 C és a vére oxigénszintje 100 %. Szóval ez az Ágika tiszta hülyének néz mindenkit!!

See Translation



January 21, 2022 · 🌐

Ágnes Kunhalmi, the fool of MSZP, posted that she was hospitalized with covid. She has tested positive for severe lung pains. She checked in from her death bed in a tight bra and her hair neatly combed, wearing a mask. She raised her head from the bed and faced the camera. She must have forgotten about her lung pains, because if she had any, she would certainly not have looked for that body condition. Although Ágika's body was packed with tubes, it was not clear why this was necessary. On the patient monitor behind her, it is clear that Ágika's body temperature is 36.2 C and her blood oxygen level is 100%. So this Ágika looks like a pure fool to everyone!!

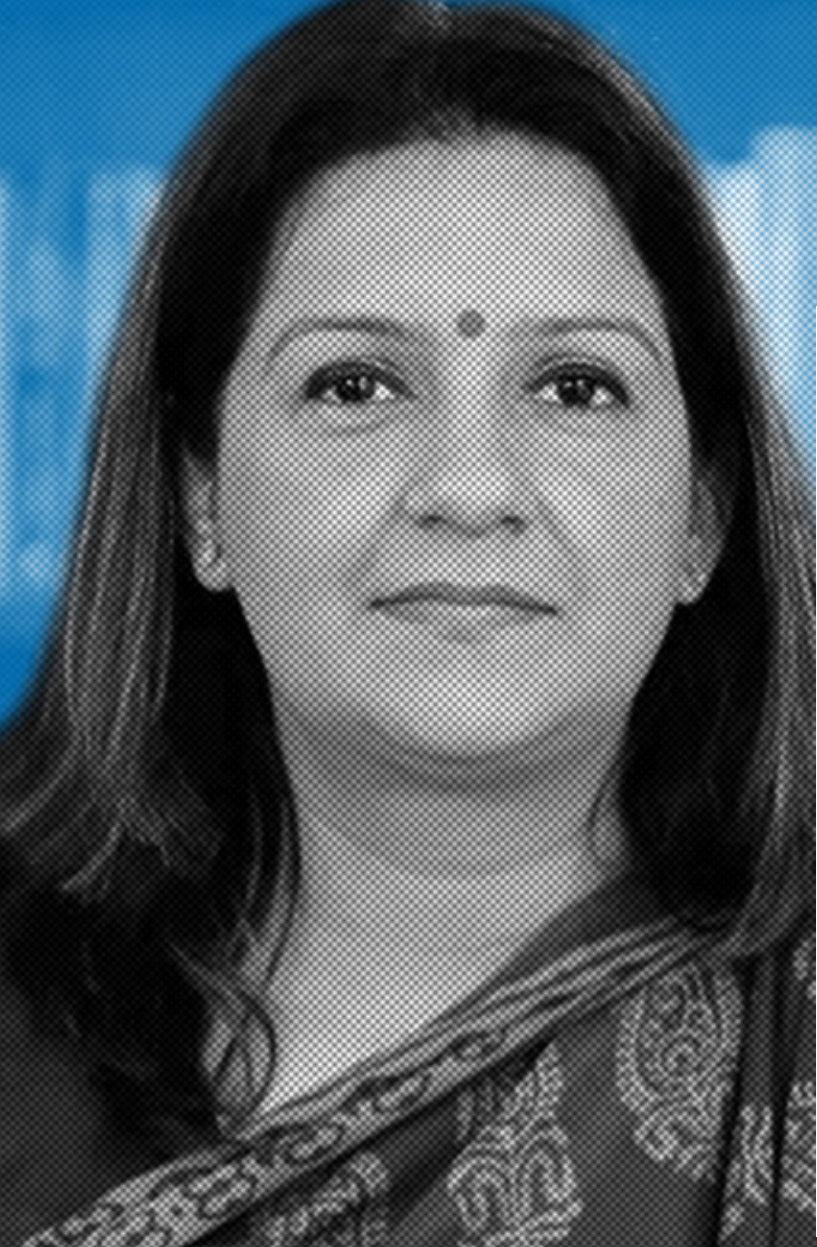


A Facebook post accusing Ms. Kunhalmi of lying about having been hospitalized for COVID-19, instead claiming that she was perfectly healthy.

ÁGNES KUNHALMI has been a Hungarian Socialist Party member of the National Assembly since 2014. As the leader of an opposition party, Ms. Kunhalmi is a vocal critic of Fidesz and Orbán's leadership. She participated in highly-publicized protests against the government in 2018 and was outspoken about her views on beating Orbán in the 2022 elections.³⁵ For years, Ms. Kunhalmi has been the target of disinformative stories. At a 2016 press conference, Ms. Kunhalmi fell into a fit of laughter and sources such as the pro-government online media outlet Ripost were quick to accuse her of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol.³⁶ In 2018, posters were disseminated depicting Ms. Kunhalmi in a doctored photo of her wearing a headscarf and promising Arabic lessons for children, as well as depicting her as naked in a cartoon.³⁷ That same year, an article published by Origo, a pro-government online media source, accused her of being more concerned with making jam, painting fences and sunbathing than taking political action.³⁸ She was also accused of being "backed by George Soros," a claim repeated elsewhere, and content posted on Facebook has accused her of lying about having been hospitalized for COVID-19.³⁹



In this poster, Ms. Kunhalmi has been photoshopped to appear as though she is wearing a headscarf. The accompanying text negatively claims she is promising free Arabic language courses and efforts supporting immigrants. Originally posted and flagged for false content by @th_ges on Twitter.



PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI, a member of India's parliament, has also been the target of vicious online attacks and gendered disinformation campaigns. In 2018, she filed a complaint to the Mumbai police after a troll account threatened the rape of her 10-year-old daughter.⁴⁰ The attack came after a fake quote was attributed to her and circulated online, claiming that she had defended the rapist of a young girl in Mandsaur, and that "it is the right of Muslims to rape."⁴¹ In a personal interview, she stated: "as the world and the operations turned to digital space, the incidents and the severity of hate attacks against women particularly women in politics, journalists and feminist activists, increased. As more women took to social media platforms to raise concerns, the level of abuses and insults shifted drastically. Words, statements which otherwise would not ever be used in the offline space were spewed so casually without any regards to the person at the other end. I refuse however to just be a cog in the system and bow down to these cowards. I continue to persist despite the hate sent across my way, every day."⁴²

The image shows a screenshot of a tweet on the left and a photograph of Priyanka Chaturvedi on the right. The tweet is from user @GirishK1605 and contains the text: "@priyankac19 प्रियंका मैं तेरी बेटी के साथ करना चाहता हूँ अपनी बेटी को मेरे पास भेजो". The photograph of Priyanka Chaturvedi has a large red 'FAKE' stamp over it and a false quote in Hindi: "मंदसौर में एक बलात्कार ही तो हुआ है मुस्लिमो का हक है बलात्कार करना हमारी पार्टी इरफान के साथ है-प्रियंका चतुर्वेदी(कांग्रेस प्रवक्ता)".

The tweet on the left states, "Priyanka I want to rape your daughter. Send your daughter to me."⁴³ It was posted in response to the photo on the right, falsely attributing a statement to Ms. Chaturvedi which reads, "only one rape has been committed in Mandsaur. It is the right of Muslims to rape. Our party is with Irfan (the rapist)."

PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI

MANUELA D'ÁVILA, is a politician of PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil) and a former municipal, state and federal lawmaker, having also ran for Vice President of Fernando Haddad (PT), the major opponent of Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 elections. Leftist, young and vocal about gender equality issues, she was a heavy target of gendered disinformation in the 2018 campaign, followed by hate and attacks that quickly escalated and targeted her family too, as a photo of her 5-year-old daughter, Laura, was shared on social media along with a rape threat.⁴⁴

In 2020, she lost the race for mayor of Porto Alegre in the second round by a margin of 8%, after having lost over 20% of points since the beginning of the campaign, as fake stories about her started spreading, including one about a fake shopping trip to Miami to buy luxury goods.⁴⁵ With gendered disinformation playing such an important role in the campaign, it is fair to ask whether the results would have been different without it. In the same year, the Regional Electoral Court of Rio Grande do Sul “overthrew” 70,000+ shares of misinformation regarding Ms. d’Avila, demanding platforms remove the content within 24 hours.⁴⁶

The meme in the bottom right-hand corner is an example of the harmful content spread during the 2020 elections and taken down by electoral courts.⁴⁷ It was spread again in 2021, a year in which there were no elections in Brazil.

In May 2022, Ms. d’Ávila announced she would not run for any political position in the general elections for multiple reasons, including the frequent attacks she and her family have suffered over the years.⁴⁸ In an interview to the newspaper Folha de São Paulo, Ms. d’Ávila revealed she has even considered leaving the country: “this is an option that I and my family have considered at many moments. It is not easy to wake up in the morning, as it happened one year ago, and see your 5-year-old daughter threatened with rape. Any person in my situation would consider to do so.”⁴⁹ The successive attacks that she and her family received – which ranged from gendered disinformation to physical attacks – led her to write the book, *E Se Fosse Você?*, or *What if It Was You?*, in 2020, which covers cases of hate networks and fake news, alongside sharing how she has dealt with the disinformation campaigns and hateful attacks facing her since the 2018 elections.⁵⁰



This meme was spread during the 2018 campaign. To the left, Ms. d’Ávila is pictured in a fake, photoshopped image showing her wearing a t-shirt stating “Jesus is a transvestite” over a rainbow. On the right, the original image shows Ms. d’Ávila’s t-shirt actually stated: “Rebel!”.



This meme has a statement that is falsely attributed to Manuela d’Ávila, “having an abortion is the only solution not to raise a bum’s kid by herself”, and one attributed to Jair Bolsonaro as if he was replying to her, “not fucking a bum is the other solution. Big hug!”

VALERIA FEDELI is an Italian politician, former Senator and was Minister of Education from 2016 to 2018. An outspoken feminist, Ms. Fedeli has been the target of multiple online attacks and gendered disinformation campaigns regarding her battles for advancing gender equality in Italy, such as a bill she sponsored in 2014 on gender-responsive education.

The bill was at the center of a pervasive online campaign of hate and disinformation, grounded in transphobic, homophobic and anti-feminist sentiments. For example, it was claimed the bill would create confusion among children regarding their sexual identity and orientation, or teach four-year-olds about sex explicitly.⁵¹


"[The bill] talked about education against violence, and for equal opportunities within schools, and it sparked monstrous debates precisely because it was fueled by disinformation. Examples of [false] narratives around this reform were: the idea that preschoolers would be shown porn movies, or that they would be asked to get naked and touch their genitals. The fear of 'gender ideology' still circulates in parental groups today," explains women's rights expert Giorgia Serughetti.⁵²

Ms. Fedeli has also been the subject of online disinformation and hate campaigns aimed at portraying her as a fool, a liar, incompetent and uneducated, and those labeling her a "monster."

Speaking on the political nature of the attacks against her, Ms. Fedeli stated: "I have always been on the front line to implement the Istanbul Convention. I have also noticed that these kinds of hate campaigns, based on the manipulation of one's thoughts, on the distortion of positions and on fake news, are growing when the [women targeted] occupy important functions and roles at a political, institutional and public level. Surely, there are political formations that use social networks to launch online hate campaigns against their political opponents, inciting online mobs against them, often distorting their thoughts and positions."⁵³



A popular Italian newspaper in 2018 accused Ms. Fedeli of wanting to abolish the Italian essay in eighth grade exams - a change that seemed senseless. The title of the article read: "the latest madness of Fedeli." She denied the accusation from her personal Facebook profile to refute the false information.



**“It’s about
defending the
values of
our democracy.”**

**Gendered Disinformation as an Early
Warning for Attacks on Women’s Rights,
Democracy and National Security**

GENDERED DISINFORMATION AS AN EARLY WARNING



As Ruth Ben-Ghiat notes of many strongmen political leaders:

"the leader's displays of machismo and his kinship with other male leaders are not just bluster, but a way of exercising power at home and conducting foreign policy."⁵⁴

The autocratic political leaders analyzed in these reports deploy misogyny as a “symbolic glue,” a way to connect with large groups of citizens who feel threatened and left out by progress on women’s and minority rights, while also using “genderwashing” as tools to shield themselves from criticism.⁵⁵

Through the research, we have found that gendered disinformation and tech-facilitated gender-based violence are ever more central tools for autocratic and illiberal political leaders to engage their constituency, silence outspoken women opposition leaders, and undermine democracy.

Nitasha Kaul finds “misogyny in the online virtual world is an accelerating and powerful means of curating the digital political sphere. These online subcultures are especially prominent among the followers of right-wing and far-right political leaders in multiple countries, where their support of misogynist authoritarians often gets exhibited through troll behavior and especially rape threats against political dissenters.”⁵⁶

For Indian MP Priyanka Chaturvedi: “usually, it is the ‘IT Cells,’ mostly unofficial but fully supported by the ruling party that target women, especially women of the opposition. These attacks are frequent in nature, well-orchestrated and it is not unfamiliar for politicians, even Cabinet Ministers to also engage or for the matter of fact, initiate such kinds of attacks.”⁵⁷

According to Alessandra Moretti, an Italian Member of the European Parliament,



"there are political parties, movements and party leaders who use fake news to discredit and attack their political opponents. It is no longer a question of protecting the image of our political force or of fighting the spread of fake news: it is a question of defending the values of our democracy."⁵⁸

ALESSANDRA MORETTI

Malign actors are also weaponizing misogyny and hate speech online, exploiting and fostering divisions in society to weaken democracy and interfere in foreign elections globally.

Gendered disinformation and the online spread of the anti-gender movement are frequently employed by malign actors like Russia to weaken feminist movements like the Women's March, under the pretext of defending what are cynically framed as "traditional values."⁵⁹ Russian information operations have also attempted to undermine foreign elections in multiple countries, including the United States, Belarus, Ukraine and Germany, with important ramifications for global peace and security.⁶⁰

While further digital investigations are needed to gain a full picture, our desk research identified Russian misinformation visibly spreading on social media in Italy and Hungary, particularly since the invasion of Ukraine, often linked to anti-gender narratives.

In the **Italian study**, some of the social media accounts who had been most active in hate campaigns against women in politics in the first half of the year aligned themselves in support of Russian president Vladimir Putin after the invasion of Ukraine, and were spreading Russian disinformation during the war.

In the **Hungary study**, we analyzed how Russian disinformation, spread by pro-government media, is now pervasive on social media platforms.

In the **Tunisia study**, we reported how coordinated inauthentic behavior on Facebook originating in countries such as Russia and Israel have targeted Tunisian voters to influence election outcomes.

In the **Brazil study**, we identified that Trump-aligned actors from the U.S. have attempted to undermine trust in the country's 2022 election, in which Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva secured defeat over Bolsonaro. They have echoed calls of voter fraud and encouraged the questioning of and retaliating against Bolsonaro's loss to shake faith in the electoral process and further entrench far-right sentiments.



**“Racism and
sexism combine in
our cases.”**

**How Women from Marginalized Groups
are Most Viciously Targeted**

WOMEN FROM MARGINALIZED GROUPS ARE VICIOUSLY TARGETED

A recent report from the Center of Democracy and Technology found that during the 2020 election period in the U.S., “women of color candidates were twice as likely as other candidates to be targeted with or the subject of mis- and disinformation.”⁶¹

They were also “the most likely to be the target of particular forms of online abuse, including sexist abuse (as compared to white women), racist abuse (as compared to men of color), and violent abuse (four times more than white candidates and two times more than men of color).” An analysis from Amnesty International, also carried out in 2020, reported similar findings in the United Kingdom, where Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Members of Parliament (MPs) appeared to receive “almost half (41%) of the abusive tweets, despite there being almost eight times as many white MPs in the study.”⁶²

Through our research, we found that everywhere, women with intersecting identities (for example, Dalit and Christian women in India or Black, transgender or indigenous women in Brazil) are the target of some of the most violent, vicious gendered disinformation and online hate campaigns which have racist, in addition to sexist, undertones.

One of the women leaders we interviewed in India, **Angellica Aribam**—former general secretary of the student wing of the Indian National Congress and the founder of Femme First, a foundation working to expand women’s political participation—told us that in her case,

“the trolling has been worse because of the intersection of race and gender. There is a stereotype in the country that women from the north-east region are ‘easy,’ ‘characterless.’



Racism and sexism combine in our cases, and because of my intersectional marginal identity I have been targeted so much. If you see my blacklist on Twitter, it would easily cross thousands.”⁶³

ANGELLICA ARIBAM

In Brazil, we analyzed how Duda Salabert, one of the first two openly transgender people elected to the National Congress of Brazil, has been the target of violent online attacks and death threats for her transgender identity and framed as “a danger to society,” who “should be isolated in a concentration camp.”⁶⁴

In Tunisia, Hanène Zbiss, a journalist and university professor, told us that the online and physical attacks and harassment of women journalists, politicians and civil society leaders “has become more violent if they, for example, have black skin or they are LGBT.”⁶⁵

In Hungary, we saw how lesbian feminist activist Emma Krasznahorkai was doxed by a pro-government website and became the target of degrading memes, insults and gendered disinformation attacks:

according to Ms. Krasznahorkai, such attacks have become so common in Hungary to the point of being absolutely “normalized.”⁶⁶

Digital platforms are to blame for the status quo. According to an analysis conducted by the Brennan Center for Justice, content moderation policies of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter “are drafted in a manner that leaves marginalized groups under constant threat of removal for everything from discussing current events to calling out attacks against their communities. At the same time, the rules are crafted narrowly to protect powerful groups and influential accounts that can be the main drivers of online and offline harms.”⁶⁷

According to UltraViolet and the Institute of Strategic Dialogue, two nonprofits actively working to address digital harms, “across the board, social media platforms fail the test when it comes to creating an internet experience that is safe and inclusive for Black women, women of color, and LGBTQ people.”⁶⁸



Emma Krasznahorkai



**“Hate is their
business model.”**

**How Digital Platforms Have Failed to
Protect Women and Democracy**

DIGITAL PLATFORMS' FAILURES

In the last decade, being part of a global online community has helped women and human rights activists rally against repressive governments and raise awareness about injustices.

Women have collectively organized across timezones and borders, and have bravely called attention to sexual abuse and harassment using social media platforms, through movements like **#MeToo in the U.S., #EnaZeda in Tunisia and #primeiroassedio in Brazil**. However, authoritarians and illiberal actors are the ones who are currently best positioned to take advantage of the tools provided by digital technologies to act on their malign aims.

In a study of state-sponsored trolling, Carly Nyst and Nick Monaco argue that “states have realized that the internet offers new and innovative opportunities for propaganda dissemination that, if successful, obviate the need for censorship.”⁶⁹ With the power of their outreach and finances, these actors are weaponizing information technology “as a means for power consolidation and social control, fueling disinformation operations and disseminating government propaganda at a greater scale than ever before.” This approach is one of “speech itself” as a “censorial weapon.”⁷⁰

Platforms promote themselves to be ideal public squares, where ideas are exchanged freely and in an equal manner. In the words of Mark Zuckerberg: “Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission - to make the world more open and connected.”⁷¹ This isn't, however, the reality. According to the American legal scholar Mary Anne Franks: “first, the significant differences between social-media forums—which are privately owned, virtual, and operated for profit—and physical public squares have important consequences for free speech. Second, the extent to which social-media forums do resemble physical public squares is no cause for celebration. After all, the public square has historically tended to reinforce legal and social hierarchies of race, gender, class, and ability rather than foster radically democratic and inclusive dialogue.”⁷²

Like a modern-day Trojan horse, what seemed like a gift promising lasting peace to the world is turning into a weapon for destruction. The way the major digital platforms are designed is largely responsible for the current hellscape experienced by women online.

Harmful narratives are boosted and amplified through algorithms that make such content sticky and often viral, through recommender systems that are built to maximize attention and features that facilitate its rapid and widespread distribution.⁷³ Through cross-channel repetition, coordinated sharing and means of simulating artificial topic momentum, attacks to undermine women can easily be taken to scale, serving companies' commercial interests at the expense of democracy and human rights.

The approach adopted by the major social media platforms to address this problem - like doubling down on “notice and take down models” of content moderation and automation - have proven to be grossly inadequate, with dire consequences for many democracies around the world.⁷⁴

Self-regulation has therefore entirely failed, and things are possibly getting worse, as the two largest social media companies have been recently decreasing the amount of attention and resources dedicated to ensuring their platforms' safety. After Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter in 2022, much of the company's Trust and Safety team has “dwindled,” while Facebook has reportedly shifted most of its focus, and resources, towards the creation of the Metaverse.⁷⁵

In a personal interview, **Marwa Fatafta**, MENA Policy and Advocacy Manager at Access Now, told us:



“disinformation, gender-based violence, smear campaigns and coordinated inauthentic behavior attacks take place with little to no action from platforms. When they’re prompted to take action, sometimes it’s too late—the harm is already done.”⁷⁶

MARWA FATAFTA

Evidence surfaced last year that Facebook/Meta internal guidelines have allowed some authoritarian world leaders to use social media to “deceive the public or harass opponents” despite being alerted to evidence of the wrongdoing.⁷⁷ That same year, an internal document was leaked, revealing that the company dedicated 87% of its resources towards addressing disinformation to the U.S., despite a majority of its users being outside of the country, and that safeguarding elections had been deprioritized everywhere.⁷⁸

In our countries of study, we saw how platforms have repeatedly failed to act in tackling abusive and disinformation content against women political leaders.

In India, for example, there have been claims that both Facebook and Twitter have provided preferential treatment for government officials, providing them private content or allowing them to violate their terms of service.⁷⁹

Recently, in Brazil, an analysis from Global Witness, with partnership from NetLab, evidenced how Facebook failed to detect very clear election-related mis- and disinformation in ads ahead of Brazil’s 2022 presidential election, despite the content being in full violation of its policies. Also, companies like Meta and

YouTube allowed posts inciting violence and calls for a military coup to be amplified to millions of people, and profited from it through their ads. The nonprofit SumofUS later denounced: “we warned the platforms that Brazil’s far-right online army was planning an attack but big tech chose to make massive profits instead.”⁸⁰

Despite mounting evidence of negative impact and growing criticism from civil society, social media companies have been so far unwilling to address the harms caused by their platforms, pledging instead to make small changes that we have denounced as largely cosmetic.⁸¹

Unless stronger digital platform standards and regulations are established and civil society presses for larger changes, it’s unlikely that we’ll be able to see any meaningful changes in this grim landscape, as digital platforms will continue making outrageous profits while externalizing on governments and society as a whole the real, often life- and history-changing impacts of the harms caused by their products.

According to journalist **Swati Chaturvedi**, recipient of the 2018 Prize for Courage for her reporting on politically organized trolling and online harassment, social media companies are responsible for enabling and even fostering sexist abuse and gendered disinformation on their platforms:



“hate is their business model—they are weaponizing and monetizing hate, at the expense of social cohesion and democracy.”⁸²

SWATI CHATURVEDI



**“I refuse to just be
a cog in the system
and bow down to
these cowards.”**

**Solutions to Address
Gendered Disinformation**

SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS GENDERED DISINFORMATION

In 2018, MP Priyanka Chaturvedi filed a complaint to the Mumbai police after receiving a rape threat directed at her 10-year-old daughter by a troll account.

The attack came after Ms. Chaturvedi had become the target of a gendered disinformation campaign, inciting hate against her. In a personal interview, she told us:



“I refuse however to just be a cog in the system and bow down to these cowards. I continue to persist despite the hate sent across my way, every day.”⁸³

PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI

While Ms. Chaturvedi is persisting, many others aren't, and young women all over the world are being discouraged from speaking out online or considering a political career as a result of online misogyny and gendered disinformation. Although there is no silver bullet to address gendered disinformation, there are legislative frameworks, policies and practices that can support in addressing this problem. Philanthropy also has a key role to play in supporting the kind of in-depth, targeted research and programming that's needed to test and refine these solutions.

Most importantly, greater investments and focus need to be directed in two areas: legislative frameworks and approaches on the one hand, and targeted, strategic, solution-oriented research and programs on the other.

01. New, globally-minded legislative frameworks and approaches to address gendered disinformation are needed

On this year's World Press Freedom Day, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media launched the 2022 Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and Gender Justice, together with the freedom of expression mandate holders from the United Nations, the African Commission of Human Rights and the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights.⁸⁴ They expressed deep concern “that online gender-based violence, gendered hate speech and disinformation, which cause serious psychological harm and can lead to physical violence, are proliferating with the aim of intimidating and silencing women, including female politicians, journalists and human rights defenders.”

As pointed out by Professor Mary Anne Franks, the truth is that, despite what digital platforms and proponents of “First Amendment fundamentalism” in the U.S. would want us to believe, unadulterated freedom of expression is a privilege of the powerful, and “is often invoked in defense of anti-gender positions.”⁸⁵

While social media organizing has proven useful in organizing important campaigns for women's rights and justice globally, women leading these movements have been targeted and abused using the very platforms they are organizing on. As put by **Marc Owen Jones**, an expert on disinformation and digital authoritarianism in the Middle East, **“there is this default assumption that these technologies are somehow related to freedom of speech and of liberty, but they are not...these companies need to do more in a lot of different areas, like tackling hate speech and tackling digital misogyny, but the incentives don't exist to make them do that.”⁸⁶**

Legislators - particularly women legislators - have been at the forefronts of numerous efforts to criminalize tech-facilitated gender-based violence in many countries.

Australia has had an eSafety Commissioner program since 2015, characterized as “a government regulatory agency committed to keeping its citizens safe online,” compelling online service providers to remove harmful content within 24 hours of receiving a formal notice.⁸⁷ In 2019, Mexico passed a new law that punishes those perpetrating “digital violence” against women.⁸⁸ Similar laws have passed in other countries, most recently including Brazil, which makes violence against a woman candidate - including online violence - a crime punishable with fines and imprisonment of up to six years.⁸⁹

While such measures are important to provide legal recourse to the women who are targeted, and possibly discourage some of the perpetrators, they alone will never suffice to address this problem. Even where legislation exists, it’s incredibly hard to be implemented at scale and address the abuse in a timely manner, as anonymous perpetrators can be difficult to trace, and the amount of such cases much exceeds current policing and judicial capacity in every country in the world.

A more comprehensive approach and legal framework is needed, that focuses on transparency and “duty of care” for social media companies with respect to the harm that is caused by their services. According to Ms. Wilfore,



“tech accountability is the real long-term solution needed,” and it’s important to “ask governments to incentivize companies to open up the black box of how amplification and artificial distortion happens on their platforms, and demand that trustworthy, independent researchers be given greater access to the platforms’ data in order to support evaluating online abuses, and recommend urgent innovations and solutions.”⁹⁰

KRISTINA WILFORE

In the European Union, the approval of the Digital Services Act (DSA) in 2022 was a landmark effort setting “clear obligations for digital service providers, such as social media or marketplaces, to tackle the spread of illegal content, online disinformation and other societal risks.”⁹¹ For example, the DSA envisages the creation of due diligence obligations for platforms’ content moderation activities, as well as an obligation for social media companies to conduct risk assessments at least once a year on the systemic risks stemming from the functioning and use of their services, not only as referring to the dissemination of illegal content, but

also to the intentional manipulation of their services (e.g. through the creation of fake accounts or bots), as well as any negative impact their services might have on the exercising of fundamental rights - including the prohibition of discrimination.⁹²

Despite these strengths, the DSA overlooked gender-based harms online, including gendered disinformation, and did not effectively drive social media companies to take accountability for such harms taking place on their platforms.⁹³ In March 2022, the European Commission proposed a directive on violence against women, which fills some of these

gaps, but fails to address others, and is still under negotiations.⁹⁴

In a nutshell, even the best legal frameworks still need improvement to meet the needs of women in Europe and, crucially, beyond.

According to Costanza Sciubba Caniglia, a disinformation expert:



“thinking of promoting this type of legal framework [referring to the DSA] in Europe only is concerning, and dangerous. It’s important that similar policies and approaches are taken all over the world, and that they are compatible across countries to avoid the very real risk of going towards a splinternet, and the fragmentation of the internet depending on politics, nationalism and religion.”⁹⁵

COSTANZA SCIUBBA CANIGLIA

Gendered disinformation is a problem worldwide, requiring a global solution and approach: companies operate on a global scale, and so do some of the dangerous transnational movements aimed at undermining women’s rights and human rights.

As a testimony of the global nature of this problem, in 2019, women legislators from 30 countries, including then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi and Congresswoman Jackie Speier, signed a letter to Facebook, asking the company: “stop the amplification of gendered disinformation on your platform. Much of the most hateful content directed at women on Facebook is amplified by your algorithms which reward extreme and dangerous points of view with greater reach and visibility creating a fertile breeding ground for bias

to grow.”⁹⁶ The letter continued: **“make no mistake, these tactics, which are used on your platform for malicious intent, are meant to silence women, and ultimately undermine our democracies.”**

Since then, more experts and international institutions have come together to demand a transnational response to this problem. One of the most promising international initiatives in this direction is the *Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse* announced at the 2021 U.S. Summit for Democracy, which aims, among other objectives, to develop and advance shared principles, increase programming and resources and expand data availability on tech-facilitated gender-based violence and gendered disinformation.

According to **Cailin Crockett**, Senior Advisor, White House Gender Policy Council, who coordinates this effort:



“the most important thing that governments can do — which all of our partners have stepped up to support as we’ve developed the Global Partnership —

is to actively commit to making the issue of gender-based online harassment and abuse a visible priority: in our policy efforts, in our investments—domestically and through foreign assistance—and importantly, to strongly oppose and when appropriate, condemn the spread of gendered disinformation or any other form of gender-based online harassment and abuse by any State.”⁹⁷

CAILIN CROCKETT

This effort is only the beginning of what should become a much broader and bolder strategy. As pointed out by Ms. Wilfore: **“only by placing gendered disinformation at the center of policy agendas to reduce online harms, can reform-minded governments score a victory for women’s rights, but also advance key national security and foreign policy objectives to prevent further democratic backsliding.”⁹⁸**

02. Targeted, strategic and solution-oriented research and programs on gendered disinformation are needed

It’s our aim to ensure the narratives identified in the five case studies can serve as a first step towards further understanding the primary importance of investing more resources towards tackling gendered disinformation as a necessary condition to address the backsliding of women’s rights and the erosion of democratic institutions threatening many countries around the world.

While this study represents an important effort to map and begin to make sense of gendered disinformation across different countries and regions of the world, wide scale data analytics and a thorough monitoring of social media channels over an extended period of time would be needed to gather more evidence and achieve a more comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, determine the degree of influence operations, and identify the malign actors behind it and their interrelations.

As Big Tech is spending large sums of money on lobbying to protect their business model, it's particularly important for philanthropic organizations to fund independent research and programming, carried out by organizations which are financially independent from Big Tech, and therefore have the ability to speak truth to power.⁹⁹

Future research should aim to map the weaponization of digital tools to facilitate malign behavior, including basic listening and trend monitoring, mapping and tracking malign actors, tracking monetization and the role of advertising, conducting terms of service compliance experiments and analyzing the activity of political actors.¹⁰⁰

Effective counter disinformation research, organizing, communication and targeting efforts should aim not only at understanding disinformation, but also at limiting its sources, spread and impact, by pressuring platforms to implement terms of service by strategically leveraging stakeholders, awareness campaigns, and so on.

According to Ms. Wilfore:

“this analysis should also be paired with public opinion research aimed at testing and verifying inoculation strategies, and taking into account geographic diversity and intersectionality, so that the women leaders targeted with disinformation can design and implement proactive counter narratives.

We should ensure we are not just understanding the modes and operations of disinformation related to the narratives, but that we are looking at the malign behavior and its consequences holistically. We have to bring the traditional set of research around understanding how leadership biases work and apply them in the context of disinformation campaigns. How we even inoculate against disinformation is very specific to the world of facts and truth and what is factual or not, when it comes to character attacks and character assassinations

grounded on already existing leadership biases, some of the traditional responses to debunking disinformation might simply not work.”¹⁰¹

Philanthropy has a big role to play as a catalyzer of this work. Yet, despite a growing interest in gendered disinformation from a multiplicity of actors, there has so far been very little funding dedicated to understanding and tackling this problem, which finds itself at a most underserved intersection of democracy, technology and gender.

On the one hand, many of the traditional donors supporting democracy and technology programs are still doing so in a gender-blind manner, as they fail to understand the need to focus on the specific threat that gendered disinformation represents not only to women leaders, but to democracy and national security.¹⁰² On the other hand, donors of gender equality issues are often reluctant to support feminist or women's rights organizations, and those who do are lagging behind in their understanding of the impact that technology has on women's rights, and are generally more willing to support short-term solutions, like digital literacy, than entering into the more complex field of disinformation.¹⁰³

As a result, while authoritarian leaders have heavily invested in troll factories that cynically take advantage of a technology that is particularly good at spreading misogyny and lies, learning from one another's strategies and playbooks, female politicians and activists have largely been left to fend for themselves in an online world that's increasingly toxic and violent.

When it comes to gendered disinformation, it's essential for philanthropists, international cooperations and researchers to understand the arena of digital threats is global, and therefore does require globally-coordinated responses, grounded in the realities and needs of women who are already working to challenge disinformation in their countries.

CONCLUSION

Initially praised and welcomed for its democratizing potential as an ideal public square of ideas, social media is turning into a modern-day Trojan horse and a weapon used to silence and repress those it promised to bolster: women, minorities, freedom fighters and human rights defenders.

Women in politics are particularly targeted with hate and gendered disinformation campaigns, which can be understood as an early warning mechanism for two very interconnected, harmful dynamics at play: the erosion of democratic institutions and the backsliding of women's rights, and thus can be utilized to respond accordingly.

As outlined in these case studies, the effects of gendered disinformation against women leaders reach far beyond the intended target. False narratives around women further entrench sexist stereotypes and misogynistic attitudes, dissuading younger generations from running for office or working in the public sphere as democratic institutions steadily erode, facilitated by the intent of populist, often strongmen political leaders that attack women's rights and liberal values as a strategic way to obtain and consolidate power.¹⁰⁴

In order for the status quo to change, governments, civil society and philanthropy must be much bolder in demanding accountability from digital platforms, and support coordinated solutions which are centered in the experiences of the women leaders who are at the forefront of the fight for democracy and liberal values around the world. Governments - especially democratic ones - must regulate platforms to protect citizens. Civil society must demand more accountability from the platforms they use, and philanthropy must invest in independent research and advocacy efforts that are not influenced by financial investments from the platforms themselves. Ensuring the internet is not used as a tool to defame, silence, threaten and de-platform them must be a priority for anyone who seeks to advance democracy, peace and security.

Digital platforms, whose algorithmic preferences and business models aid the proliferation of the most outrageous content, are largely to blame for the status quo.

Country after country, this research has shown how digital platforms have turned a blind eye to these problems, overlooking demands for accountability and transparency and failing to allocate adequate resources to address the harmful impact of their products.

We cannot continue sacrificing decades of social and political process on the altar of Big Tech's greed and incompetence – we must act with urgency to fully address the threats hidden in this modern-day wooden horse. Not doing so would be hubris, and could lead to the destruction of the democratic institutions and human rights principles we hold dear.

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