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# GENDERED DISINFORMATION

A Barrier to Equality  
and Democratic Participation

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ANALYSIS

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# Introduction

The issue of untrue or misleading information with harmful effects proliferating evermore in the digital age has become a key topic of study for researchers and policy makers, especially in the European Union, who are trying to counteract the alarming societal consequences of phenomena like “disinformation” and “misinformation”.<sup>1</sup>

Disinformation refers to the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or manipulated information with the intent to deceive, manipulate, or create harm. It is often used as a tool to influence public opinion, undermine trust in institutions, or advance political, economic, or ideological goals. Misinformation, instead, is false or misleading information that is spread without malicious intent and can arise from errors, misunderstandings, or the uncritical sharing of unverified information (sometimes also stemming as a by-product of disinformation itself).

For example, disinformation may involve the strategic fabrication of events or statistics to provoke fear or division, while misinformation might involve sharing outdated or inaccurate data under the belief that it is true. Both disinformation and misinformation can propagate rapidly, particularly through social media, but disinformation’s deliberate and manipulative intent makes it especially insidious.

Within this framework, the notion of “gendered disinformation” is a specific form of disinformation targeting individuals or groups based on gender<sup>2</sup> or sexual identity<sup>3</sup>. It is often designed to exploit societal bias, stereotypes, and prejudices to harm individuals or marginalize specific groups and usually targets women, non-binary people, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.<sup>4</sup>

At its core, gendered disinformation undermines trust in individuals and institutions by perpetuating false narratives and divisive rhetoric. This form of disinformation reinforces problematic misconceptions, such as the belief that women are unfit for leadership<sup>5</sup> or that non-heteronormative identities are unnatural or threatening<sup>6</sup>, in ways that deepen existing inequalities, limit opportunities for marginalized groups, and perpetuate systemic discrimination.

A direct consequence of it is the suppression of diverse voices in politics and the creation of unjust obstacles to their

participation in the public life, undermining democratic principles and depriving societies of the benefits of inclusive leadership. Polarization and political divide fuel an “us versus them” narrative that deepens societal divisions as it pits communities against one another and fosters an environment of hostility and mistrust.

Gendered disinformation is also used as a tool in geopolitical strategies, often by state and non-state actors seeking to destabilize adversaries. For instance, disinformation campaigns targeting LGBTQIA+ rights movements in certain regions may aim to disrupt societal progress, align public sentiment with authoritarian agendas, or stoke fear and opposition in countries with socially conservative populations. An example of this can be found in the media of Uganda, where criminalization of sexual minorities dates all the way back to colonial time.<sup>7</sup>

Targeted disinformation often leads to online harassment, including doxing, threats, and coordinated attacks. This hostile environment discourages affected groups from participating in political debates, creating a chilling effect on free expression. This is both a symptom and a cause of persistent gender inequality. The impacts on gender equality include deterrence of leadership aspirations for marginalized individuals and exacerbation of discriminatory dynamics.<sup>8</sup>

In turn, women and LGBTQIA+ individuals may be deterred from participating in politics due to the fear of targeted disinformation and harassment. A study surveying data on 8,000 local-level politicians in Sweden observed that women suffer higher repercussions than men for media visibility and for supporting minorities, and that female mayors tend to experience far more violence than other politicians.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, a study conducted by Hate Aid and the Technical University Munich in Germany reveals that women in the public eye face digital violence more frequently than men – and experience it in a more sexualized manner. This pattern translates into the offline world, where nearly half of the affected women reported experiencing gender-based and sexual harassment. The impact is profound: 49% of politically active women consider avoiding roles where they fear being targeted by digital violence. Nearly a quarter have contemplated stepping away from their current political engagement altogether.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, *Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach*, 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018DC0236>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, *The Chilling: Global Report on Online Violence Against Women Journalists*, 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223>

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Campaign (HRC), *DIGITAL HATE: Social Media’s Role In Amplifying Dangerous Lies About LGBTQ+ People*, 2022, <https://hrc-prod-requests.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/CCDH-HRC-Digital-Hate-Report-2022-single-pages.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Lucina Di Meco, *Monetizing Misogyny: Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women’s Rights and Democracy Globally*, 2023, [https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted\\_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf](https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ShePersisted_MonetizingMisogyny.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Chris Kremidas-Courtney, *The oldest form of disinformation: narratives targeting women*, 2023, <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/the-oldest-form-of-disinformation-narratives-targeting-women/>

<sup>6</sup> Cecilia Strand & Jakob Svensson, *Disinformation campaigns about LGBTIQ+ people in the EU and foreign influence*, 2021, [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>7</sup> Cecilia Strand & Jakob Svensson, *“Fake News” on Sexual Minorities is “Old News”: A Study of Digital Platforms as Spaces for Challenging Inaccurate Reporting on Ugandan Sexual Minorities*, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2019.1665565>

<sup>8</sup> Gregory C. Wolniak, *Exploring Gender Differences in Leadership Aspirations: A Four-Year Longitudinal Study of College Students From Adverse Backgrounds*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2328584231183665>

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Håkansson, *Do Women Pay a Higher Price for Power? Gender Bias in Political Violence in Sweden*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1086/709838>

<sup>10</sup> HateAid, Koch, L., Voggenreiter, A., Steinert, J. I. (2025): *Angegriffen & alleingelassen. Wie sich digitale Gewalt auf politisches Engagement auswirkt. Ein Lagebild*. <https://hateaid.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/hateaid-tum-studie-angegriffen-und-alleingelassen-2025.pdf>

It is important to acknowledge that disinformation campaigns often target individuals at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, exploiting societal prejudices to amplify harm. Intersectionality, a concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how overlapping identities – such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status – shape individuals' experiences of oppression and discrimination. In

the context of disinformation, intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding how marginalized groups face compounded vulnerabilities.<sup>11</sup>

Gendered disinformation is rarely experienced in isolation; instead, its effects are amplified by other identity factors like race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status.

# 1. Cases of gendered disinformation in the digital age

Targeted harassment of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals in public life represents a profound societal and structural challenge. This form of harassment, often amplified through digital platforms, includes a range of harmful behaviors and disproportionately affects those who challenge traditional power structures, including women in leadership, LGBTQIA+ activists, journalists, and public figures.

The rise of digital technologies and social media platforms has transformed how harassment is perpetrated, enabling coordinated and far-reaching attacks.

## Key mechanisms include:

- **Disinformation campaigns:** coordinated spreading of false or manipulated information to harm the target's reputation.
- **AI-enabled intimate image abuse:** the use of artificial intelligence to create, manipulate, or distribute non-consensual intimate images (controversially called also "deepfake porn"), to humiliate, coerce, or silence victims.
- **Cyberbullying and trolling:** harassment designed to overwhelm and silence victims, where individuals or fake accounts flood social media accounts with abusive comments.
- **Doxing and privacy violations:** publication of private information, such as home addresses or personal phone numbers, to intimidate individuals and expose them to physical harm.
- **Algorithmic amplification:** promotion of divisive or sensational content through social media algorithms that amplify content that makes illegal hate speech and harassment thrive on an emotional level, further endangering victims.

It is sadly common for women in public life to be targeted with misogynistic attacks. These attacks frequently question their competence, morality, or physical appearance, seeking to delegitimize their authority and public standing. Common tactics involve spreading false narratives, sexualized threats, and character assassinations (such as fabricated scandals, doctored images, or rumors designed to erode public trust).

Victims of harassment often experience anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The fear of violence or reputational damage leads many to withdraw from public life, curtailing their professional opportunities and personal well-being.<sup>12</sup>

The following are examples of high-profile gendered disinformation episodes:

## a) Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni<sup>13</sup>

In 2020, explicit deepfake videos featuring Italian politician Giorgia Meloni's likeness were uploaded to American pornographic websites, amassing millions of views. These videos, created by superimposing Meloni's face onto the bodies of adult performers, were produced and disseminated by two Italian nationals. The perpetrators were later identified and faced legal action for defamation.

Meloni filed a lawsuit against the individuals responsible, seeking 100,000 EUR in damages, which she pledged to donate to a fund supporting female victims of domestic violence. She emphasized the severity of the offense, stating, *"I insist on asking that the person responsible for this intolerable and very serious act is punished"*.<sup>14</sup>

The incident occurred before Meloni became prime minister, in 2022 and was widely interpreted as an attempt to undermine her political career. As a rising political figure, she was subjected to an attack that sought to damage her credibility and influence through digital manipulation.

<sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 1991, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>

<sup>12</sup> Pew Research Center, *The State of Online Harassment*, 2021, [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/01/PL\\_2021.01.13\\_Online-Harassment\\_FINAL-1.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2021/01/PL_2021.01.13_Online-Harassment_FINAL-1.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Tom Kingston, *Meloni sues deepfake porn creator 'to protect women'*, 2024, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/europe/article/meloni-sues-deepfake-porn-creator-to-protect-women-rxvjz08x7>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

b) Taiwanese legislator Huang Jie<sup>15</sup>

Huang Jie, a Taiwanese legislator known for her progressive stance on social and environmental issues, has been a frequent target of disinformation campaigns, particularly from Chinese state-affiliated actors seeking to destabilize Taiwanese democracy.

Huang Jie became internationally recognized after a viral video showed her reacting with an eye roll during a speech by a political opponent. While this moment endeared her to many Taiwanese citizens, it also made her a target for disinformation. Campaigns painted her as disrespectful, immature, and unfit for public office, weaponizing stereotypes that women should remain deferential in political settings.

These attacks escalated over time, with disinformation accusing her of sexual impropriety, financial corruption, and incompetence. Doctored images and videos circulated online, portraying her in compromising situations to damage her credibility. Chinese-backed narratives also framed her as a destabilizing force in Taiwanese politics, aiming to undermine her pro-democracy stance.

c) Algerian boxer Imane Khelif<sup>16</sup>

Imane Khelif, a prominent Algerian boxer and trailblazer for women in sports, faced gendered disinformation and stigmatization, particularly after her exclusion from the Boxing World Championships in Russia in 2023 shortly before the gold medal bout due to failing unspecified eligibility criteria for women's competitions. Khelif had previously won against the formerly undefeated Russian boxer Azalia Amineva. The controversy surrounding her exclusion sparked a wave of targeted attacks.

After her exclusion and especially during the 2024 Olympic Games, disinformation campaigns circulated false claims about Khelif's gender, with narratives questioning her femininity and suitability for women's sports. These narratives were rooted in stereotypes about women in athletics, particularly those whose physicality challenges traditional notions of femininity. The disinformation not only questioned her gender but also suggested that her success was unfair or fraudulent, especially after her victory of the gold medal at the Paris Olympics 2024.

Khelif's prominence as a female athlete in a male-dominated sport clashed with conservative societal norms, making her an easy target for disinformation. Online trolls and commentators framed her as an affront to traditional values, while others used the controversy to argue against the inclusion of women in competitive sports.

## 2. Policy directions for combating gendered disinformation

Gender-based disinformation is a pervasive issue that undermines equality, erodes democratic principles, and perpetuates societal biases. To address this challenge, governments and organizations must implement legal frameworks, policies, and accountability measures to prevent the spread of disinformation and protect those targeted by it.

### 1. Establishing comprehensive legal frameworks

Governments must legislate protections against the harms of gender-based disinformation that align with international human rights principles. Effective legal frameworks should address both the perpetrators of disinformation and the platforms that enable its spread.

- **Sanctioning gender-based disinformation:** introduce laws that specifically target disinformation cam-

paings aimed at exploiting gender, sexual orientation, or identity. These laws should encompass the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information targeting individuals or groups based on gender, and penalties for coordinated campaigns aimed at inciting violence, harassment, or illegal hate speech.

- **Illegal hate speech and harassment legislation:** strengthen laws addressing online harassment and illegal hate speech, ensuring they cover gendered disinformation. This includes expanding definitions of illegal hate speech to include disinformation targeting marginalized groups, and protecting individuals from gender-based threats, such as sexual violence or defamation, often associated with disinformation campaigns. *The European Digital Services Act (DSA)* mandates an assessment of systemic risks including gender-based violence and negative effects on civic

<sup>15</sup> Jake Chung & Jonathan Chin, *INTERVIEW: 'Eye-roll goddess' lambasts Han Kuo-yu's leadership*, 2019, <https://www.taipetimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2019/05/19/2003715415>

<sup>16</sup> Associated Press, *Imane Khelif wins Olympic boxing gold amid false gender claims*, 2024, [https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/\\_/id/40797618/algeria-imane-khelif-wins-olympic-gold-amid-gender-dispute](https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/40797618/algeria-imane-khelif-wins-olympic-gold-amid-gender-dispute)

discourse and electoral processes.<sup>17</sup> While it only partly covers gendered disinformation this serves as a good starting point, that can further be built on.

- Privacy protections: enforce laws against doxing (publishing private information with malicious intent), which is commonly used in gendered disinformation campaigns strengthening data protection laws to prevent the misuse of personal information, such as the EU *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR).<sup>18</sup>

## 2. Platform accountability and regulation

Governments should implement regulations holding digital platforms accountable for their role in amplifying gender-based disinformation.

- Transparency requirements: mandate that platforms disclose the functioning of their algorithms, moderation practices, and the origin of content flagged as disinformation. Governments should require platforms to publish regular reports, including on the prevalence of gendered disinformation and actions taken to counter it, providing data on flagged content and coordinated disinformation campaigns targeting gender. A good example of this kind of the legal imposition of this comes from the DSA.<sup>19</sup>
- Content moderation standards: require platforms to develop robust content moderation policies that specifically address harms from gendered disinformation. These policies should include rapid removal of flagged false or harmful content targeting individuals based on gender or sexual orientation, collaborating with human rights organizations to train moderators in recognizing gendered disinformation.
- Algorithmic accountability: regulate and limit algorithms that prioritize sensational or harmful content, ensuring platforms do not amplify gender-based disinformation. Governments can legislate the development of algorithmic tools that can detect disinformation. A current example is the German project DeFakts, which takes an AI-driven approach to researching and countering disinformation. It collects large datasets from suspicious social media and messenger groups and trains a self-learning system to recognize characteristic patterns and stylistic markers of disinformation. The project aims to develop a user-friendly tool that allows individuals to assess and verify online content quickly and transparently.<sup>20</sup>

- Penalties for non-compliance: impose significant fines or other penalties on platforms that fail to take action against detected harms of gendered disinformation. These penalties should incentivize assessing and mitigating the risks stemming from the scale of their digital infrastructure (similarly to what is imposed by the EU DSA).

## 3. International collaboration and frameworks

Disinformation often transcends borders, requiring coordinated international efforts to combat its spread. Drawing on international frameworks can enhance the efficacy of national legislation..

- *UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights* (UNGPs):<sup>21</sup> encourage adherence to the UNGPs, which call on corporations, including digital platforms, to prevent human rights abuses, including gender-based discrimination and violence facilitated by disinformation.
- *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights* (OHCHR):<sup>22</sup> advocate for the development of binding international standards to combat gendered disinformation, such as a global definition of gender-based disinformation, and guidelines for state responsibility in addressing disinformation campaigns targeting gender.
- EU frameworks on disinformation: leverage the European Union's Code of Practice on Disinformation<sup>23</sup> to encourage self-regulation by platforms while integrating gender-specific measures, advocate for the adoption of similar frameworks in other regions.

## 4. Victim support and redress mechanisms

Governments and organizations must ensure that individuals targeted by gender-based disinformation have access to adequate support and legal recourse.

- Legal aid for victims: establish programs that provide legal assistance to victims of gendered disinformation, ensuring that victims can seek redress for damages, including reputational harm and emotional distress.

<sup>17</sup> EU Regulation 2022/2065, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng>

<sup>18</sup> EU Regulation 2016/679, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj/eng>

<sup>19</sup> EU Regulation 2022/2065, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2022/2065/oj/eng>

<sup>20</sup> Matthieu Binder & Nikolai Horn, *Demokratie und KI - Wie technologischer Fortschritt demokratische Strukturen stärken kann*, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> UNHR, *Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights*, 2011, [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinessshr\\_en.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinessshr_en.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/>

<sup>23</sup> European Commission, *The Code of Conduct on Disinformation*, 2025, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/code-conduct-disinformation>

- **Psychosocial support:** fund mental health and counseling services for individuals targeted by disinformation campaigns, ensuring that these services are accessible and culturally sensitive.
- **Reporting mechanisms:** create accessible and secure channels for individuals to report gendered disinformation. Both platforms and law enforcement should strengthen capabilities to react swiftly to gendered disinformation and illegal hate speech. This includes streamlined cooperation with platforms, and secure mechanisms to preserve digital evidence that holds up in court.
- **Access to help online:** Lower the threshold of reporting violations by providing user-friendly legal aid platforms to report violations of personal rights or other damage. In France for example the government platform Pharos can be used to report illegal content.

## 5. Public awareness and education

Raising awareness and fostering media literacy are essential to reducing the societal impact of gender-based disinformation.

- **Media literacy campaigns:** support national campaigns to educate the public about the dangers of gendered disinformation and how to identify it. These campaigns should promote critical thinking skills and encourage responsible sharing of information online.
- **Support for civil society initiatives:** provide backing for NGOs and advocacy groups that combat gendered disinformation through community outreach and education. A great example of this comes from the organization #ShePersisted that research digital harms, support women leaders to build digital resilience, and advocate for improved digital standards.<sup>24</sup>

- **Inclusivity in education:** incorporate lessons on gender equality and media literacy into school curricula, equipping young people with the tools to challenge disinformation and stereotypes.

It is crucial to acknowledge that social media platforms play a central role in the propagation of gender disinformation due to their ability to amplify content rapidly and widely. While these platforms provide spaces for public discourse and connection, they are also fertile grounds for harmful campaigns targeting women and marginalized groups. As key intermediaries in the digital information ecosystem, social media companies have a responsibility to identify, mitigate, and reduce systemic risks for gender-based disinformation on their platforms. This responsibility includes accountability for amplification, and collaboration with stakeholders to address the root causes.

Counteracting gender disinformation requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses its root causes, mechanisms of dissemination, and societal impacts. Looking for a singular solution would be insufficient because gender disinformation intersects with deep-seated cultural biases, thrives on the amplification provided by digital platforms, and influences both individual behavior and institutional practices. This approach must integrate legal, technological, societal, and educational strategies to mitigate its effects, protect targeted individuals, and foster an inclusive public sphere.

The fight against gender disinformation is far from over, and sustained action is necessary to protect equality and democracy. Ongoing research will deepen our understanding of this phenomenon, evidence-based policy development will create the frameworks for systemic change, and public awareness initiatives will empower individuals to resist harmful narratives. Working together across sectors, borders, and communities, we can counter the pervasive impacts of gender disinformation and build a more inclusive, equitable, and democratic future.

<sup>24</sup> <https://she-persisted.org/>



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He is an attorney at law and digital rights advocate experienced in tech law, criminal law and digital forensics. As an independent lawyer, he collaborates with different NGOs and law firms located across Europe, Africa and North America being responsible for cases pertaining privacy, cybercrimes and the safeguard of workers' rights.

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