

ADDRESSING THE GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF DISINFORMATION

Points by

Sandra Pepera

Director – Gender, Women and Democracy

National Democratic Institute

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What is Violence Against Women in Politics

- **ALL** violence against women and girls (VAWG) is an **abuse of human rights** and should be stopped
- Violence against women in politics (VAW-P) encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation against women as political actors **simply because** they are women
- It is designed to restrict the political participation of **women as a group**
- **A deliberate political strategy to change political outcomes**

“The internet is for everyone” ...

“As political discourse increasingly shifts online, a free, open and inclusive internet where all citizens can engage in dialogue is critical to modern democracy. Online spaces can be particularly important in helping women and other marginalized groups to overcome barriers to becoming politically-active, thereby broadening the inclusive and participatory nature of democracy.”

Opening sentences from NDI's 'Tweets that Chill' Report

but...

“Online violence against women is an overt expression of the gender discrimination and inequality that exists offline. Online, it becomes amplified.”

- Jac sm Kee of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

Different Forms of Online Violence

Tools of Harassment include:

- *Doxing*
- *Trolling*
- *Swatting*
- *Cyber-Stalking*
- *Revenge Porn*
- *Mob Attacks*
- *Unsolicited Sexting/Pornography*
- *Google Bombing/Zoom Bombing*

These weapons are hugely intimate. They come into the home on devices that are close to our person - a particular trigger to women's sense of insecurity.

Physical vs. Online Typology

Don't look for physical attacks online - you need to look for *threats* of physical attacks online

VAW-P typology

Psychological

Psychological / Threats &
coercion / Economic

Physical

Sexual

Online VAW-P typology

Insults and hate speech

Embarrassment and
reputational risk

Physical threats

Sexualized distortion

Online VAW-P ↔ Disinformation

- Online VAW-P manifests as insults and hate speech, embarrassment and reputational risks; physical threats and sexualized distortion.
- Used by bad-faith actors for the purposes of disinformation
- Through the language and framing of misogyny and gender-based tropes.

A NEW INFORMATION DISORDER

→ Conscious and purposeful undermining of the freedom and integrity of the information space and a threat to democratic processes.

What is disinformation?

- It's in the middle of the spectrum between **falsehoods** and **intent to do harm**.
- **Fabricated or deliberately manipulated text, audio or visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours.**
- Misinformation: **unintentional mistakes** such as inaccurate photo captions, translations, dates, statistics. Or when disinformation is amplified in ignorance.
- Malinformation: **Deliberate publication** of private or personal information for corporate or personal rather than public interest, e.g. revenge porn. Deliberate change of content.

Gender and Disinformation

Online gendered disinformation campaigns have the potential to manipulate entrenched gender norms to do *one or all* of three things:

1. Cause some portion of half of the population that are **women** - women activists, voters, party members, candidates, elected officials and members of government - to withdraw from politics or participate in ways directed by **fear** (VAW-P)
2. Shift popular support of both **men and women** away from visible politically-active women, undermining a significant leadership demographic, and manipulating political outcomes, weakening democracy
3. Influence how **male and female** voters view particular parties, policies or entire political orders

What does it look like? This...

Disinformation is often a core mechanism of harassment campaigns targeting women who are seeking to be or already in political leadership positions not necessarily to keep women out but to manipulate political outcomes.

Milly Omanga, a Kenyan Senator, has been attacked by numerous online trolls with gender-based disinformation campaigns. One example is below featured on Twitter where the false accusation was made that she used her sexual influence to gain power and influence through her employer to be sponsored for her current position. The same user targeted her employer specifically with the intent to discredit her.



...and this.

After Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk gave a speech to the United Nations on the effect on women of her country's war with Russia, she became a target of online disinformation intended to discredit her as a political leader not necessarily because she was a woman but because she was presenting a countervailing narrative to that of the state. Faked tweets and doctored images began appearing online, claiming that Zalishchuk had promised to run naked through the streets of Kiev if the Ukrainian army lost a key battle. Ultimately, this misinformation was aimed at pushing her and her countervailing view out of politics.

State-Based Gendered Disinformation

Emerging Findings:

- Disinformation relies on co-opting underlying values, beliefs and language to get its message across, rather than trying to invent something new
 - Can then result in methods of disinformation spreading more widely and being used against people beyond the original targets
- “Patriotic trolling” / “networked disinformation” - genuine users and paid employees boost government narratives online, across multiple platforms
- “Countering” and defense against sexualized distortion can still be grounded in patriarchy and gendered disinformation
 - Philippines Leila de Lima - *Humans make mistakes because of love and sex - de Lima is only one of them*
- Rather than focusing on high-profile, mainstream political accounts known to share disinformation, attention should be paid to smaller, denser networks of users

We have been weaponized - and warned.

“Social media allows you to reach virtually anyone and to play with their minds. You can do whatever you want. You can be whoever you want. It's a place where wars are fought, elections are won, and terror is promoted. There are no regulations. It is a no man's land.”

- Deception, Inc. Entous and Farrow
The Atlantic

How do we stop this?

- To effectively counter disinfo and its impact on democratic processes, we must understand:
 - **Which** demographics are perceived as open to manipulation through disinformation and **why**
 - **How** particular groups are differentially targeted
 - **Manner** in which social ideologies (*religious, ethnic, class, race...*) are leveraged to successfully create desired political outcomes

Things to keep in mind

- Take the time to raise awareness of gender inequality and the ways in which gender tropes and stereotypes and tropes are used to control women's and men's political activity and to change political narratives.
- Stop and reverse “the relentless pace of carelessness” - Soraya Chemaly
 - **We have the tools and expertise that you need**
- Keep humans at the center of the frame
 - **Introduce more “friction”**
- Invest in counter-strategies
 - **Technologies**
 - **Victim support**

As Parlts and Parliamentarians

- There has been a failure of states to protect women in their own jurisdictions, let alone across jurisdictions: see Rosanna Dinamarco, Diane Abbott; but success for RD and Astrid Thors, Finland. UK Law Commission - baffled that apparently when women make reports of harassment they are not taken seriously
- Govts should bring forward legislation to shift the liability of illegal content online towards social media companies.
- Actively engage with platforms about the gendered abuse and disinformation you and your staff are observing on government and non-government social media properties.
- Adopt rules against the sharing of disinformation or manipulated media during campaigns or against sitting MPs, with sanctions that mean something – e.g. censure or the removal of the whip
- If possible, pro-actively moderate gender-based abuse or disinformation on social media properties linked to the parliament.
- Social media companies need to develop and implement automated techniques to identify intimidatory content posted on their online platforms.