

#SHEPERSISTED
GLOBAL INITIATIVE:
TACKLING GENDERED
DISINFORMATION
& ONLINE ATTACKS
AGAINST WOMEN IN
POLITICS



TACKLING GENDERED DISINFORMATION & ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS IS NECESSARY TO PROMOTE PEACE AND DEMOCRACY GLOBALLY

The January 6th storming of the Capitol was the horrific expression of a political movement grounded in misogyny and white supremacy which had been in the making for years, fueled by the misinformation and online violence thriving on social media.

While there are high profile women aligned with the efforts to undermine democracy, let's be clear, the storming of the Capitol was led by an angry mob of white, mostly male Trump supporters, waging war against democratic institutions, trashing Congresswomen's offices to symbolically re store "a retrograde world in which men, especially white men, hold all the power". The crowd that descended on the Capitol was a byproduct of an online world increasingly dominated by the "Manosphere", a global conglomerate of web-based misogynist movements, that have in recent years grown and gathered political strength.

Women, particularly those in politics, have been bearing the brunt of online attacks, fake stories, humiliating or sexually charged images, with posts framing them as untrustworthy, unintelligent and unqualified to hold office, as well as incredibly offensive content featuring women as emotional/angry/crazy sex objects.

A deep program of disinformation and harassment was actively at work against Vice President Elect Kamala Harris throughout the 2020 election cycle, including attacks on her criminal justice record and claims she used sex to gain prominence and power. A recent analysis of the 2020 U.S. congressional races conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue found that female candidates were significantly more likely to receive online abuse than their male counterparts. Such online attacks have very real consequences, as disinformation campaigns and online attacks have in fact been shown to discourage women from running for office, push them out of politics, or lead them to disengage from online political discourse in ways that might make them less politically effective, visible, or electable. On some occasions, physical violence followed online threats, as exemplified by the foiled kidnapping plot of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, which had been preceded by months of systematic online attacks.

This isn't an American problem only, but a world-wide phenomenon, and one that is increasingly coming at odds with American foreign policy and international aid efforts to promote democratic institutions and women's rights abroad.

Why women?

In many countries, women politicians, journalists and activists are among the most outspoken critics of macho, populist political leaders, and gendered disinformation campaigns and online abuse are being used to silence them, in an effort to stifle democratic processes and undermine calls for better governance.

Putin in Russia, Duterte in the Philippines, Orban in Hungary, and Erdogan in Turkey are all examples of political leaders using misogyny's playbook to eliminate political competitors and push back against women's rights. In other European countries also, recent studies from Demos and the EU Disinfo Lab unveiled a vast network of state-aligned actors at work to delegitimize women in politics, by weaponizing sexist narratives and gendered disinformation.

Like the mob that stormed Congress, the ultimate goal of these actors is to erode liberal values and democratic principles all together, and they have found in social media's anonymity and lawlessness an ideal breeding ground.

A unique window of opportunity to act

After the assaults on the Capitol, a growing number of actors in the United States are demanding for social media companies to be held accountable for allowing and incentivizing misogynist, fake and outrageous content, and similar initiatives are taking place on the other side of the ocean.

The Biden-Harris Administration has committed to creating a *National Task Force on Online Harassment and Abuse* to study the connection between this harassment, extremism and violence against women. They also have explicitly moved away from the isolationist "America First" approach that characterized the Trump era, launching a new EU-US agenda for global change and opening a transatlantic dialogue on the responsibility of online platforms and Big Tech.

This context provides a unique window of opportunity for an American-led, global civil society effort to address malign influence campaigns and how they work online against women, with the larger goal of eroding democratic processes and values.

A TWO-FOLD STRATEGY TO TACKLE GENDERED DISINFORMATION AND ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN IN POLITICS

In 2020, Lucina Di Meco and Kristina Wilfore built the foundation of the gendered disinformation field, by creating taxonomy, tools, and a coalition of organizations and individual women legislators globally invested in promoting women's digital rights and pushing back against platform inability to protect women in politics from harm and abuse. Building on those experiences and learnings, they are now launching the *#ShePersisted Global Initiative*.

As a result of this initiative, researchers, activists and policy-makers will be better able to understand the dangers and realities of gendered disinformation and online attacks against women in politics, and their connection to authoritarian threats. A core group of women politicians and journalists in key countries will be better equipped to respond to coordinated online attacks and demand greater accountability from social media platforms.

In order to accomplish this, the *#ShePersisted Global Initiative* will build a well-organized, structured, and resourced network, a deliberate research and capacity building agenda, and a coordinated advocacy strategy, with two clear goals:

1. Increase understanding of gendered disinformation and online campaigns against women in politics

Develop a network and narrative map of the major disinformation initiatives and their link to existing campaigns that trivialize and de-platform women who are politically active, and erode democratic institutions. Examples of activities include:

- Produce and disseminate research focused on understanding the motives, modus operandi, and consequences of coordinated gendered disinformation campaigns and online attacks against women in politics in key countries.
- Analyze and evaluate inoculation strategies against gendered disinformation, including by studying the impact of technological innovations (like ParityBOT and Harmony Square) and media literacy.
- Design and pilot evidence-based tools that take into account bias and are aimed at tackling gendered disinformation and online abuse against women in politics.

2. Build a network of women leaders in journalism and politics, implementing evidence-based solutions against gendered disinformation

Create, coordinate and support a network of women political leaders who are at the forefront of democratization efforts and calls for good governance across various countries, and are becoming targets of gendered disinformation attacks as a result of their political engagement. This initiative provides them with the tools they need to successfully respond to online attacks, and advance regulatory solutions. Examples of activities include:

- Develop and implement a comprehensive media strategy, creating and disseminating research and evidence-based content to effectively counter harmful narratives, and piloting contextually-relevant media toolkits on how to report on sexist and racist disinformation without replicating it.
- Build the capacity of a core group of women political leaders on how to use social media in a way that is safe and effective, by refining and contextualizing the curriculum created by Lucina Di Meco and Kristina Wilfore and tested in 2020, in collaboration with Rep19, Vital Voices, NDI, and the Women's Legislative Lobby.
- Create a space for women political leaders to build alliances across countries and influence platform decisions, build-ing on the letter to Facebook launched by Representative Jackie Speier, with 100 signatures from women lawmakers in 30 countries, facilitated by Lucina and Kristina.

Disinformation, sexism, white supremacy and hate are features of social media today, not unintended consequences. This dangerous mix of extremism is being fomented by a tech industry that values profit over safety and inclusion. Women in politics and leaders of activist movements have borne the brunt of vicious online abuse and gendered disinformation campaigns, aimed not just at silencing their voices, but at destabilizing democracy. The *#ShePersisted Global Initiative* is tackling this problem by enhancing research and understanding of gendered disinformation campaigns at works; connecting a network of women leaders globally, and providing them with the tools they need to respond to online attacks, and advance regulatory solutions. The *#ShePersisted Global Initiative* is led by Lucina Di Meco and Kristina Wilfore, trailblazers in the field of women's political leadership, and gendered disinformation globally.

DO YOU WANT TO SUPPORT THIS EFFORT?

#ShePersisted Global Initiative is finalizing its core group of institutional partners and supporters, and getting ready to launch. If you'd like to join us in this pioneering effort, please write to us at: lucina@she-persisted.org and kristina@she-persisted.org.

Co-Founders

Kristina Wilfore



Kristina Wilfore is a global democracy activist, working with political leaders and NGOs around the world to help improve the quality of campaigns and elections and bring new voices into politics. Kristina is a specialist in responding to the threat of disinformation and building transatlantic networks to weaken its impact, with on the ground experience in over 27 countries.

Kristina currently serves as Senior Advisor of Disinformation Strategies at the Strategic Victory Fund; Adjunct professor with The George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs; Producer and Host of *Fatima's Hand*, a podcast featuring women fighting for gender equality, and serves on the United States Institute for Peace Civil Society Working Group. In 2020, Kristina co-founded The Women's Disinformation Defense Project. Comprised of some of the most influential women's political groups, including UltraViolet, Planned Parenthood, NARAL, Emily's List, Women's March, Colors of Change.

The Women's Disinformation Project was the first disinformation monitoring, coordination and response table for women ever, aimed at holding platforms accountable, and providing clear, coordinated talking points and message content for journalists and women's organizations responding to gendered disinformation attacks.



Lucina Di Meco

Lucina Di Meco is a gender equality expert and advocate, working with global networks of women leaders to promote gender justice. Throughout her career, Lucina has worked with a wide range of international actors promoting women's rights in the Global South, including Vital Voices, The Wilson Center, International IDEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, UNDP and UN Women.

Her research, *#ShePersisted. Women, Politics & Power in the New Media World*, investigates the relationship between women in politics and social media in 30 countries, and was featured on *Time Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Politico*, *El Pais* and *Voice of America*, among others. Lucina has written on gendered disinformation and social media harms for *The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, *The Hill*, *Ms Magazine*, *New America*, *The Council of Foreign Relations*, *The National Endowment for Democracy*, and *The Women's Media Center*.

Lucina currently serves as Senior Director for Gender Equality at Room to Read; co-founder of The Gender Breakfast, a network of 150+ gender professionals in the San Francisco Bay Area, and Advisory Board Member of FundHer, an organization working to elect progressive women to State legislatures.