



G E N D E R
SEX I S M
S T O R Y
G I R L C H I L D
I N C E L
F A L S E
M E T O O
S T E R E O T Y P E S
M O L D O V A
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R E V E N G E P O R N
A U D I E N C E



For more on disinformation generally, including practical tools to spot and combat disinformation, please have a look at the sister publication, the Disinformation handbook, available here: <https://iwpr.net/projects/focus/countering-disinformation-moldova>

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Acknowledgements

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Content warning:

This handbook contains some discussions of gender-based violence, sexism, homophobia, and strong language. While this is not detailed or graphic, it may not be suitable for all audiences, and in particular younger children.

GENDER DISINFORMATION HANDBOOK

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The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) empowers local voices to drive change in countries in conflict, crisis, and transition. Where hate speech and propaganda proliferate, and journalists and civic activists are under attack, IWPR promotes reliable information and public debate that makes a difference.

The information provided in this handbook does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice; instead, it is intended for general informational purposes only.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GENDER

DISINFORMATION

EDITOR'S NOTE

This handbook is designed to support communicators, campaigners, journalists, and educators. It is the sister publication to the Moldova Disinformation handbook which looks at disinformation in all its forms.

Gender disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda are big subjects. To understand them well you will need an understanding of history, politics, online behaviour, and even biology.

This is because one of the biggest false claims is that gender differences are fixed, universal, and 'natural' and that these are 'traditional values' which are somehow under threat. The truth is that gender roles vary from culture to culture and have always changed over time. More on page 14.



Gender disinformation can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, reinforce victim-blaming narratives, and contribute to a culture of silence and shame around gender-based violence

Source: Ana Gherciu, development director from Moldova.org

When it comes to information about gender, we've never had it so good.

When it comes to information about gender, we've never had it so bad.

Access to accurate information is the miracle of the modern age. We have access to almost all of the world's knowledge in a device in our pocket, in a way that would have been inconceivable to previous generations.

False information spreads faster than corrections. From false stereotypes and narratives to revenge porn and AI-generated attacks designed to silence the role of women in power, we are living in an alarming era of gender disinformation.

An increasingly digital world has the power to liberate us from the traditional constraints of rigid gender roles.

False and damaging narratives are causing women and girls stress and putting them off leadership positions.

We can factcheck false comments instantly using digital verification techniques instantly. With better DNA testing, CCTV, and digital tracking of stalkers we can stop the harassment of women.

In an increasingly digital world, we have never been more susceptible to false information. From deepfake porn right through to entire ideologies based on false science, there has been a huge increase in the forms of abuse.

There has never been an age where gender disinformation does not exist.

What can we do about it?



It's not just female politicians and journalists who are targets of online abuse; anyone in the public eye can be exposed to harassment and false stories. In 2024 X/Twitter blocked searches on pop singer Taylor Swift due to deepfake porn. She had previously fallen out with Donald Trump after backing Democrats in the US election.

SOURCE: [Trump Allies Pledge 'Holy War' Against Taylor Swift](#)

DANVECTORMAN | VECTEEZY.COM

DEFINITIONS

Gender/ed

In the context of this handbook, we use 'gender' to refer to the social and cultural differences rather than biological differences between sexes. Gender disinformation is sometimes referred to as gendered disinformation, or gender-based disinformation. We have used the shortest version throughout, except in reported speech: as with terms like gender violence and gender discrimination, in this context 'gender' can refer to social, psychological, cultural, and behavioural traits.

Traditional gender values

This slightly vague term has come to mean different things to different people, partly because gender has always been somewhat complex. The idea that women are nurturing and polite and that men are and strong and aggressive, for example, is sometimes described as 'traditional', despite evidence that throughout history and across the world these attributes are not universally accurate.

CASE STUDY:

WOMEN IN POLITICS

EDITOR'S NOTE

During the 2022 local elections in Moldova, WatchDog.MD monitored manipulative and false messages related to gender. Its authors noted that the term “gender” is used as a “symbolic glue” for all those who consider that they are “fighting against gender ideology”. These include far-right parties, religious groups, the Orthodox Church and international organisations campaigning to stop abortion. They oppose equality between women and men, sex education, women’s reproductive and health rights and ‘non-traditional’ marriage, including single-parent families. Analysis of Telegram and Facebook content found that the term “gender bias” is used to appeal to conservative voters and to denigrate political opponents. LGBTQ rights are portrayed as a threat to society and to traditional values, while the Istanbul Convention (a human rights treaty opposing violence against women) also comes under fire.

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You are a women’s magazine editor based in Chişinău and in charge of your team’s editorial team meeting. You are aware that much of the language about Maia Sandu has been sexist: referring to her appearance, the fact she doesn’t have children, and other comments which have nothing to do with her ability as a leader. Which of these ideas from your team will you support? Or would you do something else?

- “We should choose a more positive story instead. We should not be amplifying negative comments as it is likely to put young women off entering politics.”
- “We could produce a guide for women on how to get into politics.”
- “Let’s write an opinion piece which calls out this terrible behaviour.”

FEEDBACK

It is true that according to some research, the negative treatment of women in public life, including online harassment and threats of violence, puts some girls and women off politics. Harassment is designed to do just that.

It can feel like by discussing these issues – and therefore amplifying them – you may be doing the work of those who seek to keep women out of the public arena. So you have to handle the issue with sensitivity.

But pretending the problem does not exist will not make it go away. Nor will it protect women. This particular case has been widely reported in Moldova, so you will need to be creative in your approach to avoid ‘reader fatigue’.

You might want to do a special edition on ‘women in politics’, which features a combination of these ideas.

Also, if you are an editor then you should always be thinking about your audience. What’s right for them? What are your ‘editorial values’? This will determine how you cover the subject. Even though we consume digital media more than print these days, there is still a wide range of print magazines out there, from glossy women’s mags that rely on advertising, through to feminist DIY style ‘zines with low print runs and a more radical attitude.

Magazines often have longer features with a higher word count than online, so there is an opportunity to go a bit deeper into a story. Realistically, though, Moldova’s magazine industry is fairly small. Across the world many print titles have gone digital-only or ceased to exist, while podcasts – which are cheaper and easier to set up than print titles – are enjoying a boom in popularity.

“Arguably, the most famous case is that of Malala Yousafzai, the young Pakistani girl who, after surviving an assassination attempt prompted by her stance for women’s rights, had to withstand a hostile campaign on the internet.”

SOURCE: [Hate speech against women should be specifically tackled](#)



SOURCES

Garcu, Piotr - Moldova Ratifies Istanbul Convention Amid Disinformation and Opposition – Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 14 december 2021. <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/moldova-ratifies-istanbul-convention-amid-disinformation-and-opposition>

Watchdog.MD

For more on the studies on the negative treatment of women in politics, please go to page 16

Jacinda Ardern photographed when she visited members of the Muslim community at the Phillipstown Community Centre during her time as New Zealand Prime Minister

336,000

pieces of abusive content were shared by over 190,000 users over a two-month period, about 13 female politicians

SOURCE: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>

DEFINITIONS

'Malign creativity'

Use of coded language, memes, and other techniques to comply with site rules and avoid censure. Examples include this spelling of 'bltch', emoticons with a racist or homophobic double meaning, and 'innuendo' hash tags which imply that women in power are promiscuous and slept their way to the top.

Deepfakes (a branch of synthetic media)

The use of AI and other technology to artificially alter videos. Typically this is malicious and an attempt to belittle a political opponent, for example fake pornographic videos of female politicians.

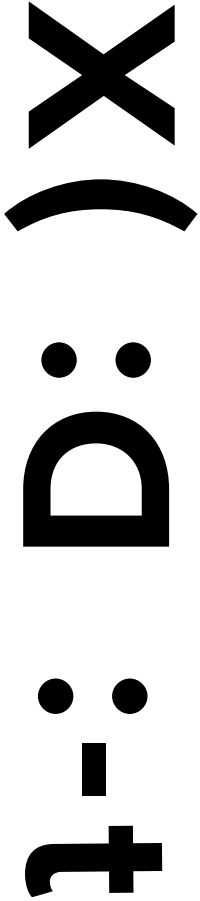
Misogyny

Hatred, contempt, dislike, or mistrust of women.

Patriarchy

Originally used to describe a society in which the father or oldest male is head of the family (it means 'the rule of the father' in Greek), the use of the term has widened, particularly in feminist scholarship and popular culture, to mean a society in which males enjoy privileges and power from which women are excluded.

HOW GENDER DEBATES CAN GET SO ANGRY AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT



Sex is what we are born like - biological identification, while gender is how the person identifies him/herself

Svetlana Ignatiuc, finance sector, Moldova

Gender debates online can get angry...

On the one hand, this may reflect the fact that a lot of these discussions happen online and often anonymously. People may be more angry and ruder than they would be in real life. Also, we know that many gender issues are genuinely divisive. We all have different opinions. Some people are more 'liberal' or 'conservative' than others, and we often get our information from very different sources.

However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that some state actors deliberately amplify divisive issues as part of their strategy. Sometimes this can be an attempt to discredit specific individuals.

In 2021, for example, the German Green MP Annalena Baerbock was targeted by a campaign featuring fake nude images, Jewish conspiracy memes and false claims that she would forcibly vaccinate people. This campaign was amplified by several Kremlin-sponsored accounts. Many believe that Baerbock's opposition to the Nord Stream 2 project for a gas pipeline from Russia to Germany was the main reason she was targeted.

Russia clearly stood to lose billions of dollars in revenue from the cancellation of the project, so it appears that there were specific strategic reasons for this disinformation.

At other times, the goal is simply to get people arguing amongst themselves, and to sow discord. Famously, the Internet Research Agency in St Petersburg amplified Black Lives Matter protests and counter-protests. It also amplified anti-vax messaging, conspiracy theories, election disinformation and anti-refugee rhetoric. Inevitably, gender issues were a target, including LGBTQ issues and trans debates.

These operations are large in scale and constantly changing. During the 2016 US presidential election, for example, Russian-backed Facebook messages reached 126 million people in America. This was widely reported as a key moment in social media disinformation tactics.

While disinformation may appear inconsistent and contradictory, and at times focus on bizarre and shocking stories, it is designed to make people cynical and distrustful. Russian-backed messages might include things like: "stay home on election day, your vote doesn't matter", "the West is in decline" and "the world is confusing, you need a strong leader who will look after you."

In addition to stoking fears about 'gender ideology' in schools (see page 21 for a definition), Russian messaging has disproportionately targeted European female politicians, as well as Hillary Clinton in the US. TikTok, Instagram, and Telegram have been used more recently, and influencers have been paid to spread messages across a range of platforms.



SOURCES

'The gendered disinformation playbook in Germany is a warning for Europe':

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-gendered-disinformation-playbook-in-germany-is-a-warning-for-europe/>

Russian influence operations on social media

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/19401612221082052>

Facebook operation reached 126 million people:

<https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/533-read-report-internet-research-agency/7871ea6d5b7bedafb19/optimized/full.pdf>

This is a useful resource on spotting logical fallacies (in English)

<https://yourlogicalfallacyis.com/pdf/FallaciesPoster24x36.pdf>

<https://yourbias.is>

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You hear a rumour that a school with a progressive headmaster has allowed children to ‘identify’ as any animal they choose, and even provides litter trays for kids. What should your TV station do about it?

- Send a reporter to the school in question
- Verify the story online, and decide what to do...
- Get a range of opinions on the story, as this would make a great discussion programme

FEEDBACK

This story was a hoax that has been widely reported as true on certain media channels, notably the Joe Rogan show in the US and some of the British tabloids, reaching hundreds of millions of people. But some background is probably required on this strange story!

The false claim that children have identified as animals and been recognised by their schools has a more complex history. There do exist internet subcultures where adults dress as animals in their leisure time. Although this is a relatively niche activity, it has been widely reported as a ‘fancy that’ type story.

The ‘children identifying as cats in schools’ hoax seems to have started in Canada in 2021 and spread widely across America. At least 20 Republican politicians repeated the false claim, which seems to have been linked in some people’s minds with gender identity debates. The story is very easy to factcheck on the internet, so no need to send a reporter to factcheck this. Nor is there a need to get people to discuss – and therefore amplify – the false claims.

In cases like this, it is best to factcheck first and then decide whether you want to cover the story. If the false version has been widely reported in your region, but not the truth of the story, it could be worth covering. If the story has been widely debunked already, you might want to avoid adding to the noise. It is the kind of story amplified by states that wish to portray Western society as decadent and broken.

DISCUSSING GENDER, CALMLY

LISTEN

Many conflicts are resolved through finding common ground; even if you disagree with someone, or they are saying things you know to be false, listening to what they have to say is an important first step.

THINK ABOUT BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

The idea that people change their minds away from disinformation simply by being presented with the actual facts has been disproven by several studies; there’s more information in the disinformation handbook, and on page 34.

SPOT AND AVOID MAKING LOGICAL FALLACIES

Exaggerating or misrepresenting the other person’s argument? That’s a strawman fallacy. Attacking someone personally instead of addressing their argument? That’s an ad hominem attack. Both are examples of logical fallacy, along with use of loaded questions, cherry-picking data, and false balance.

BEWARE OF YOUR OWN COGNITIVE BIASES

These can be more subtle than you think: while you might be aware of confirmation bias (excluding the facts that don’t fit your thesis) you may find it harder to spot others, like the Dunning-Kruger Effect (thinking you understand an issue because you don’t realise how complex it is) or the ‘curse of knowledge’ (once you understand something you forget that others don’t share your experience).

PICK YOUR BATTLES, STEP AWAY FROM THE SCREEN

Was it Confucius or Plato who said ‘she who argues with a stranger on the Internet rarely comes away happy’? Some people on certain social media platforms seem to thrive on conflict. It can be bruising, and people rarely change each other’s minds: often, it can best to get away from the Internet.

DEFINITIONS

Furry

A person who belongs to a subculture with a strong interest in anthropomorphism! These are adults who dress like animals.

Norms

In social sciences, this describes important concept of acceptable behaviour. For example in many countries, pink for girls is an accepted norm.

Cosplay subculture

Short for ‘costume play’, this is a youth trend which over the last 30 years has spread from Japan to many countries around the world. People dress up as their favourite cartoon character, film star, and less typically, animal.

Moral panic

In academic humanities and particularly sociology, this term describes the (often irrational) fear about people or things that offer a perceived threat to society. Often in parallel with the term ‘folk devils’, examples of moral panics based on disinformation include witch trials, pizzagate, satanism and rock music...

Edgelord

A person who makes exaggerated, provocative statements online in order to get attention and get a reaction out of others.

WHAT TEENAGE BOYS GET UP TO IN THEIR BEDROOMS

EDITOR'S NOTE

We hope it's clear from the quotation marks that the authors distance themselves from these comments about young men. These are harmful negative stereotypes. The young men we've met in Moldova have in particular been polite and helpful.



"Young men often willingly jeopardise their health by engaging in high-risk activities, as a result of clinging to stereotypical images of men and masculinity."

SOURCE: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/masculinities#:~:text=Risk%20taking%20behaviours%20and%20young,in%20young%20men%27s%20health%20statistics>



**Oh, well,
a young man
Ain't got nothin'
in the world
these days**

SOURCE: Young Man Blues, Mose Allison, 1957

It's something of a modern cliché to suggest that teenage boys are distant and uncommunicative; always on their devices; and possibly looking at things they shouldn't whilst they are on those mysterious screens...

In fact, there's been a perceived problem with teenage boys for centuries: Roman and Ancient Greek commentators were amongst those worried about young men getting 'too soft'. From 'dandies' in 18th Century Britain to hippies who were mocked for their effeminate fashion, to Soviet era crackdowns on 'hippies' (including forced haircuts and the banning of Beatles records) there has been a long history of society being concerned about young men being too soft, effeminate or 'girly'.

On the other hand, there have also been several moral panics about young men who are

too violent; from Edwardian street gangs to gun and knife crime today. It gets intersectional: young male immigrants are sometimes portrayed as a particular threat, for example.

And whether it's rock music or rap, via football hooligans or drug dealers: some subcultures have appeared to monetise shocking and often sexist or violent behaviour.

And from the Spartans to the Hitler Youth, there have been those who believed that joining an army would toughen up boys and young men, and there are modern mens' groups online.

While the moral panic about what to do with boys and young men has a long history, the Internet age has produced what seems like a particularly dark strain of role model targeting insecure boys and some men have made a career out of a fairly extreme form of misogyny.

CASE STUDY

Andrew Tate and the rise of the ultramisogynistic influencer

Many of us, young men included, could agree that the world seems to be changing fast and can feel like a challenging place to be. Jobs for life are a thing of the past, as globalisation, automation and now AI, have threatened many occupations. It's hard to live up to masculine gender ideals. Modern role models tend to be hyper-successful sportsmen, businessmen, or entertainment figures. Big issues like the climate crisis, the pandemic, economic inequality and the rise in global armed conflict dominate the news media.

For Andrew Tate, the answer is simple. Feminists are to blame and men should stop being respectful to all women. Instead, they should exploit them: by pimping them out on pornographic websites, for example.

The British-American influencer and former kickboxer is very popular. He has over eight million followers on X/Twitter, where he shares his thoughts on a variety of issues, often baiting liberals and sharing his philosophy on life. ("Winners act. Losers read," is a typical example.)

Tate is happy to describe himself as misogynistic and sexist and has talked in interviews about how he made money from getting women to appear on sexually explicit webcam channels. He once boasted about breaking a woman's jaw.

He runs a kind of online 'academy' called The Real World (formerly Hustler's University) where members pay a monthly \$49.99 fee to learn his life lessons and get special access to get-rich-quick schemes.

Tate is currently based in Romania, where he is awaiting trial on charges of human trafficking, rape and sexual exploitation, which he denies.



SOURCES

The Bechdel Test

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/jul/02/alison-bechdel-test-dykes-to-watch-out-for-cartoonist-interview>

THE EMOTION WHEEL

A lot of disinformation is designed to make you feel strong emotions, because people tend to share things they feel strongly about. Some disinformation is designed to make its 'targets' feel bad about themselves.

Transphobic content is designed to make people

A N G R Y

'Immigrants are rapists' memes designed to make some people

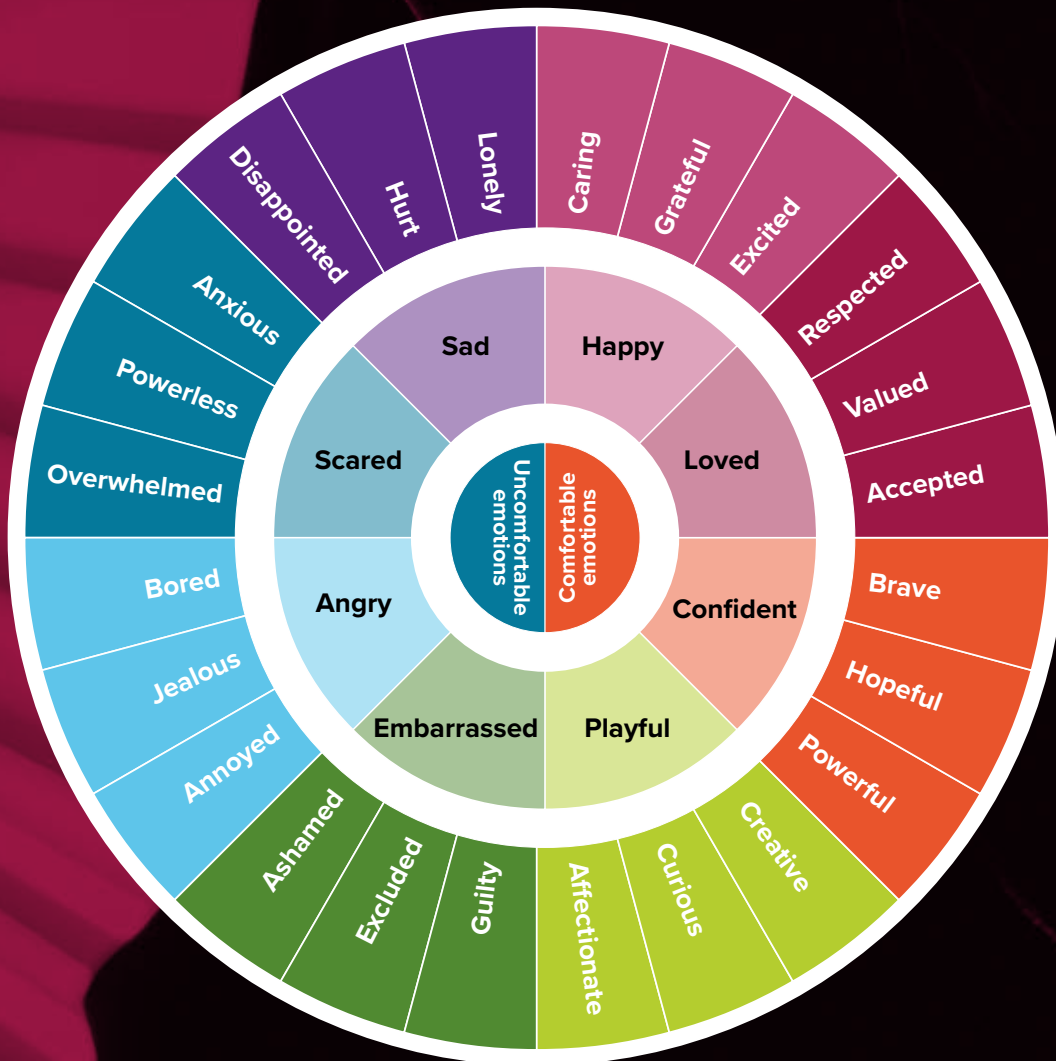
A N X I O U S

'Follow these rules and you'll attract women' is designed to make some people

H O P E F U L

AI-generated porn is designed to make its targets feel

A S H A M E D



DEFINITIONS

Toxic masculinity

Somewhat vague media term which has come to describe all kinds of poor male behaviour, including sexism, homophobia, violence, and anger.

Pickup artist (also PUA)

Men who self-identify as seeking to achieve multiple sexual partners, often using a set of techniques they will share (for a sign-up fee to a particular course).

Incel

Short for 'involuntary celibate', this term was invented in the 1990s. Despite being invented by a queer Canadian woman, it is often associated with misogynistic, usually male, online communities. Incel ideology has been blamed for shootings in the US, Canada, and the UK.

The emotion wheel

The image on the left is based on a diagram created by psychologist Robert Plutchik, Ph.D. Most modern versions feature eight sections: joy, fear, surprise, anger, trust, sadness, disgust, and anticipation.

THE BIRDS, THE BEES, AND OTHER **GENDER** DIFFERENCES...

EDITOR'S NOTE

One of the claims made by people who argue that gender diversity is 'unnatural' and created by humans who have something wrong with them, is that there are traditional gender roles which are based on 'natural' laws.

In fact, there is a very wide range of 'gender roles' and behaviours in the natural world: this includes gay penguins; frogs, butterflies, and flatworms that can change sex; seahorses that get pregnant; polyandry... and yes, there are also several species of birds that mate for life!

Or to put it another way, if gender roles were 'natural' and 'universal' you wouldn't need culture to reinforce it; nor lawmakers to influence how the subject is taught in schools; nor sanctions for those who choose to live their lives differently; and there wouldn't be a multi-billion-dollar beauty industry.

Sex and gender are often used interchangeably, but they mean different things – and the difference matters. A person's sex refers to their physical characteristics, such as male, female, or intersex.

Gender is far more complex and relates to what people in a particular society have determined should be described as feminine or masculine. It comprises a set of expectations about behaviours, roles, and characteristics. It changes over time and varies among societies as each culture has its specific views about what men or women can or cannot do and how they should or should not behave. It is not related to body parts but how you are expected to act because of your sex.

In most cultures everything from hairstyles to jobs is gendered. Masculinity is associated with short hairstyles, wearing trousers, doing physical jobs, and playing most sports. Femininity is associated with long hairstyles, wearing makeup, and caregiving roles. Society has deemed nail polish to be feminine - in reality, anyone is free to paint their nails.

The important thing to remember is that no-one can decide what someone's gender identity is except for that individual. There is no right or wrong way to express one's understanding of their own gender.

Gender identity

It is each person's internal and individual experience of gender. It is a person's sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. People's gender

identity may or may not match their sex - if a person's gender identity doesn't align with their sex, they might identify as nonbinary or transgender.

Gender dysphoria

Affects those who experience a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. The sense of 'unease' can lead to depression and anxiety. Can occur during childhood, puberty, or later in life.

Polyandry

Where one female mates with several males in a breeding season. Polygyny is where one male mates with several females.

Gender disinformation

Gender disinformation refers to false or manipulated information that is intended to cause harm to women or people of diverse genders and sexualities, often those in the public sphere, with the aim of silencing them. Often has an intersectional element.

Intersectional

Used to describe the (sometimes complicated) way in which combined identities can affect marginalised people and groups. It has been noted that women politicians, journalists, and activists from racial, ethnic, religious, or other minority groups are targeted far more often than their white colleagues, for example.

ISSUE	FALSE EXPLANATION/S	REAL REASON
Women are victims of rape	Women wearing short skirts, going out and drinking, men feeling emasculated	Men raping women
Mixed gender toilets	These were introduced by politically-correct trans rights activists with no regard to the safety of women	Introduced to save corporations money because mixed toilets take up less space
Online criticism of Maia Sandu	Women without children cannot represent Moldovan society where the family is central	Conservative politicians using gender issues to pursue an anti-West agenda
Identity debates	Children are allowed to identify as cats in school because liberals in the West have gone crazy with their identity politics	This entirely false story was invented to give the impression that liberals in the West have gone crazy with their identity politics
Increase in rape in some European countries like Sweden	Immigrants to blame	Wider definition of rape introduced, to include partners and victims The statistic was spun into an anti-Islam story by those who either oppose immigration, or those wanting to get people arguing about the issue, particularly anti-EU groups

Differences between men and women can feel so 'natural' to us, it's easy to forget that many are 'cultural constructs'.

Gender

Raising children

Wearing particular colours e.g. pink for girls

Baby feeding

Playing certain sports

DEFINITIONS

Sexual dimorphism

The difference (in form) between the different sexes of the same species. In mammals, for example, males are usually bigger than females but female spiders are larger than males. In humans, the differences are relatively low, and variable: some adult females are taller than some males, for example.

Sex

Giving birth

Tendency to be larger and stronger

Male, female, and Intersex (having both ovarian and testicular tissue)

Breastfeeding

Difference between lung capacity

"As for the concept of defining "being a man", I find it problematic [...] Instead, our focus should shift towards cultivating qualities that lead to personal fulfillment, such as becoming happier, actively listening to the needs of others, reducing ignorance, fostering openness, and refraining from judgment."

Source: Anatolii Oprea, Gender Mainstreaming Consultant, Moldova

GENDER DISINFORMATION THROUGHOUT HISTORY

EDITOR'S NOTE

It's hard to change people's minds from something learned at school, or from a widespread idea in mainstream culture. Once people believe that only men can be top scientists, for example, or that homosexuality is a recent phenomenon, it becomes hard to convince them otherwise. This partly explains why authoritarian leaders want to control how history is taught.



31 BC

Battle of Actium

Features Octavian's smear campaign, including fabricated narratives against Marc Antony, is seen as an early example of disinformation: it stereotyped Marc Antony's lover Cleopatra as a manipulative, sexual foreigner who stood against 'traditional' Roman family values.

1500s - 1660s

Witch trials across Europe

Despite the revival of interest in science, the Early Modern period was peak witchcraft trials: it has been estimated that several thousand were killed, mostly women.

1792

'Vindication of the Rights of Woman'

The English philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft argued that women should receive an education and play a role in public life. Seen as an important early feminist work, it was successful on its launch, but its author was the subject of vicious attacks that included false accusations of engaging in sex work, speculation about her private life and criticism for remaining unmarried.

1840

Birth of Tchaikovsky

The composer is celebrated in Russia, although his homosexuality (widely accepted by biographers) has been written out of his life story in his country of birth. A 2013 biopic of the composer is reported to have been rewritten in order to avoid breaking 'anti-gay propaganda' laws.

1877

'The Fruits of Philosophy'

Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh tried for obscene libel in the UK after publishing 'The Fruits of Philosophy', a book which explained contraception. At the time sex education was suppressed by religious authorities. Generally, the Victorian era was a golden age of fertility disinformation: as well as the 'facts of life' being withheld, women were considered emotional, irrational, and incapable of voting.

1893

New Zealand grants female suffrage

Becoming the first country in the world to allow all women to vote in general elections. In Saudi Arabia this right was granted in 2015, although women still can't vote in Vatican City.

FACT CHECK

Claim: "In the past women stayed at home and looked after the home, while men were the main breadwinners"

Status: It's complicated

Background: This 'traditional' view of distinct gender roles is a fairly recent construct. Throughout history the idea that women should be mothers or unpaid workers in the domestic sphere has certainly existed. Variations on this theme appear in medieval poetry, Victorian Britain, 1950s American advertising, and even in Nazi ideology which held that a woman's main role was to produce children. It has been echoed by some politicians more recently.

But gender roles have always been much more complex than this image suggests; your status and wealth would have certainly come into it, but during the industrial revolution, for example, thousands of women worked in mines, and in medieval times peasant women would certainly have to work in the fields alongside men. There is evidence of medieval women being involved in work as diverse as animal husbandry, baking and cooking, childcare, piracy, book-keeping, estate management, art, brewing, and design. Today, roles also vary: women are high-flying executives, domestic workers, and everything in-between including stay-at-home mums and those who choose not to have children.

<https://time.com/6248218/medieval-women-workforce-lessons/>

SOURCES

More on Marie Curie <https://www.science.org/content/article/statistically-speaking-2019-nobel-prize-lineup-11-men-and-one-woman-was-bound-happen>



Who controls the past, controls the future.

Source: George Orwell in his 1984

1914-1918

The Great War

Seen as an important turning point for women's rights in Europe: with a shortage of men, women worked in munitions factories, drove buses, flew aeroplanes...and campaigned for equal rights when the fighting stopped.

1920s

Homosexuality legalised

After the Russian revolution, the Bolsheviks initially abolished Tsarist-era laws criminalising homosexuality. It was re-criminalised under Stalin in 1934. Throughout this period, homosexuality remained illegal in nearly all Western countries – in the UK it was only partially decriminalised in 1967.

1950s

Post-war stereotypes

In Soviet Russia equality propaganda is not matched by women achieving positions of power. In many prosperous democratic countries an emerging stereotype of women as stay at home mothers in a consumer society re-emerges.

1997

'The Gender Agenda'

Widely seen as a milestone in the 'anti gender' movement, this book was written by Dale O'Leary, a conservative American journalist. The book introduced a wider audience to many themes that are topical in Moldova today, like the accusation that there is a feminist elite conspiracy that aims to destroy the traditional family structure via the UN.

2017

#MeToo movement goes mainstream

The movement (and hashtag) originate from a 2006 grassroots campaign, started by US social activist Tarana Burke, with the aim of 'empowerment through empathy'. It became a global phenomenon a decade later, after a number of high profile sexual assault survivors named their attackers: from Moldova to Malaysia, many others shared their stories.

DEFINITIONS

Manosphere

Online spaces where anti-feminist and misogynistic content is normal. These include forums, blogs and websites, which sometimes overlap with far right and nationalist groups. There have been a number of hate crimes, ranging from harassment to shootings, associated with men who spent time in these online spaces. It's also quite hard to define, and not always coherent. For example, there is some crossover with conservative religious groups who claim to promote 'traditional values', as well as those who offer to teach men how to sleep with and exploit as many women as possible.

Urban myth

A funny, strange or horrific story, told as if true.

FACT CHECK

Claim: "Science has traditionally been dominated by men"

Status: It's complex

Background: On the one hand statistics would seem to back up this claim: 3%* of the total Nobel prizes in science have been awarded to women, for example.

Having said that, women have not always been given credit for their scientific work. Go back a few hundred years and you find several fields in which ordinary women used evidence-based practical methods that we would now regard as more 'scientific' than those of the educated. For example brewing, midwifery, and herbal medicine are among the activities which were considered 'female' and 'lowly' professions, whereas astrology and philosophy were considered to be the 'important' (and male) professions.

Throughout history many universities have excluded women completely, or discouraged them from science subjects. Even successful scientists have had to work hard to get recognition. For example, Marie Curie conducted pioneering research on radioactivity and discovered the elements polonium and radium: but many people even today still believe her husband had done all the hard work. Rosalind Franklin was written out of the history of DNA by two male collaborators who used her data.

*According to the Smithsonian magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-nobel-gender-gap-widens-as-no-women-awarded-science-prizes-180978835/#:~:text=Of%20the%20219%20laureates%20to,awarded%20jointly%20with%20male%20peers.>

GENDER DISINFORMATION IS AN EARLY WARNING OF EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND BACKSLIDING OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Democracy and gender activists Lucina Di Mecho and Kristina Wilfore founded #ShePersisted in 2019 after noticing an increase in gendered disinformation and online abuse affecting women in public life. Despite this, women's perspectives are often missing from key conversations around democracy and technology.

"We noticed that little attention was paid to the effect that disinformation against women leaders has on democracy. Sexism in politics is nothing new, yet the way digital platforms are designed exponentially increases misogyny, weakening social norms of inclusion and civil discourse, normalising abuse, and sheltering perpetrators," says Di Mecho.

"These campaigns are designed to discredit, devalue, and delegitimise women's political standing, with the goal of ultimately undermining their ability to participate in civic life," she says. "We asked ourselves: what happens if half of the population doesn't feel safe to engage in a political career because of what happens to them online? What type of democracy do we then have?"

Digital platforms are complicit in perpetuating and amplifying – and monetising – the violent attacks that women face online. Social media companies are notoriously secretive about their algorithms and how they are designed. But researchers have noticed that algorithm preferences are designed to amplify pre-existing biases and boost sensationalist, controversial and emotionally charged content.

#ShePersisted conducts in-depth research about digital harms, particularly gendered disinformation against female leaders. It also supports women leaders to increase their digital resilience and build resistance, for example developing tools to respond to the attacks they are the target of. It also advocates for better and stronger digital platforms standards, policies, and regulations.

"Gendered disinformation is an early warning of the erosion of democracy and backsliding of women's rights," Di Mecho says. "This is because these campaigns largely target women who are at the forefront of defending democracy and liberal values in countries that are sliding into autocracy.

"For example, human rights defenders or women politicians who support women's rights and talk on behalf of minorities, be they religious, ethnic, or sexual and gender-identity groups. There is also an element of a national security threat, where we have seen gendered disinformation being used by 'bad actors' to exercise and influence foreign elections, for example in the case of Russia's influence on Germany's elections [in October 2021]."

State-aligned gendered disinformation campaigns are used as a deliberate tactic to smother opposition voices, erode democratic processes, and silence demands for government accountability.

We asked ourselves: what happens if 50% of the population doesn't feel safe to engage in a political career because of what happens to them online? What type of democracy do we then have?

"Due to these attacks many women decide against running for office, self-censor, or refrain from speaking out, while illiberal actors become bolder in their use of social media as a tool to silence opposition, roll back women's rights, and erode democratic institutions," Di Mecho says.

Things are even worse for women facing intersectional discrimination and bias on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion and other factors. Or in countries where women face bigger barriers in their access to justice and where discrimination is socially accepted or legally supported.

Tech companies bear a great deal of responsibility. Algorithm preferences enable smear campaigns to be organised, amplified, and cheaply financed, reaching millions of people, and ultimately affecting democracy.

"Social media platforms have been repeatedly called out and yet they have failed to do anything to protect their consumers, particularly those outside of the United States and western Europe, even during elections," Di Mecho says.

"They decided to remain on the same path because that path is the most profitable. While we, consumers, are asked to be more aware of what we use and how we use it, platforms pile [up] profits from that victimisation."



Gendered disinformation is an early warning of erosion of democracy and backsliding of women's rights. It is also a national security threat

SOURCE: Original interview with Lucina Di Mecho, co-founder of #ShePersisted





We asked ourselves what happens if 50% of the population doesn't feel safe to engage in a political career because of what happens to them online? What type of democracy do we then have?

Lucina Di Meco

GENDER DISINFORMATION IS AN EARLY WARNING OF EROSION OF DEMOCRACY AND BACKSLIDING OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS



There are two sides to the story, notes Di Mecco. “Women are told to ‘stay safe’, to protect themselves online. The truth is, they can’t,” she says.

“They can devise response strategies, for example turning to the judiciary, like journalist Patricia Campos Mello did in Brazil. Hers was an important and valuable response particularly because the perpetrator [Brazil’s then-president Jair Bolsonaro] was so powerful.

“However, ultimately women cannot prevent organised campaigns playing out on digital platforms, not least because some platforms have been designed to do just that. That’s why putting the legal, emotional and financial burden on the women who are the targets of these attacks can’t represent a large-scale, viable solution.

“There is no end in sight of how many attacks a woman can receive online. It is nearly impossible to think that a single individual can go after each and every perpetrator: it would be like trying to empty the sea with a teacup.”

Despite this dire situation, Di Mecco is optimistic. Awareness on how algorithm preferences work, and how they harm women

and children, is increasing among the public, and some countries have started to design regulatory frameworks.

“Political parties could also do more to support women candidates and leaders with the knowledge and skills to respond to attacks and some media outlets have become more skilled at writing about gendered information, and related cases, without replicating it,” she says.

“Effective counter-disinformation efforts should aim not only at understanding the phenomenon, but also at limiting its sources, spread and impact, pressuring platforms to implement their own terms of service through campaigns that leverage multiple stakeholders’ engagement and concerns.

“We work with women leaders, supporting them in designing response strategies that change the narrative around women’s leadership and demanding more accountability from social media platforms. There is an element of designing strategic responses that can be further improved. Over time, we have seen some women leaders successfully doing that.”



Women are told to ‘stay safe’, to protect themselves online. The truth is, they can’t



SOCIAL MEDIA GIANTS

EDITOR'S NOTE

Gender disinformation is thousands of years old and certainly thrived in the early days of the internet, which was a male-dominated space. The global lockdowns during the Covid pandemic saw a boom in false information. From false cures innocently shared through to full-blown conspiracy theories, the explosion in false information has been widespread and international.

Understanding the nature of online disinformation can be complex and involve disparate groups finding common ground. They may share memes, false stories or derogatory images. IWPR research found that Islamist terror groups in Somalia, for example, shared content that had been generated by US churches who had previously proudly claimed an anti-Islamic ideology.

This confusion continues when conservative Christian groups, for example, are anti-feminist based on a 'protection of the traditional family' narrative. They share a space in the 'manosphere' with people like Andrew Tate who are happy to brag about their role in exploiting women on pornographic websites. (see page 10)

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You have been asked to advise the minister in charge of communication. What are you going to do to tackle gender disinformation on the big social media platforms?

- Ban all the big platforms like Facebook and X/Twitter
- Develop close relationships with the executives and try to influence their policies through diplomacy and lobbying
- Make sure that you develop an education curriculum that includes spotting and countering disinformation
- Do nothing: censorship is always bad

FEEDBACK

This is an incredibly challenging question – and if you solve this one, you will have succeeded where many believe that world leaders have failed!

There are no easy answers. The course of action taken by governments tends to reflect the ideology of a particular government. Pro-market liberal democracies tend to be tolerant of social media and are desperate to avoid anything that can be seen as censorship, for example.

Experience shows that it can be difficult and counterproductive to try and ban internet platforms. This hasn't stopped countries like North Korea, China or Iran from trying, as well as Russia, where Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn are blocked along with thousands of other websites.

In Moldova, as elsewhere, many users just end up accessing 'banned' sites through proxy servers. And because freedom of expression and the right to information is a human right, banning platforms can make your country look like an undemocratic and totalitarian state. It's also the kind of thing that can alienate young people.

On the other hand, getting too cosy with executives from tech giants – which has also been tried by many governments – can be counterproductive. The hard evidence suggests that they have done very little to effectively combat disinformation. While there is no obvious best answer, in theory improved media literacy offers some potential. If audiences can spot disinformation, it doesn't matter that social media is full of it...

DEFINITIONS

The Great Reset (economic recovery plan)

Drawn up by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea was to promote a post pandemic economic recovery which involved a reduction in energy consumption and an increase in equality.

The Great Reset (global conspiracy theory)

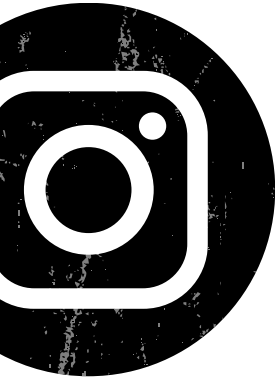
The idea that claims that Covid was planned; that governments, businesses, and that global organisations like the UN and the World Economic Forum were working together in order to reduce the liberties of ordinary people. Whilst this may seem so fanciful as to be easily ignored, it gained international traction.



SOURCE

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesbusinessdevelopmentcouncil/2022/03/23/the-attention-economy-standing-out-among-the-noise/?sh=6d2d86677fda>

SOCIAL MEDIA GIANTS



Our algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness

SOURCE: Facebook internal presentation, reported in Wall Street Journal, 2018

SCENARIO EXERCISE

Who is most likely to be targeted on social media?

- a) A female football commentator
- b) A teenage school girl who blogs about the environment
- c) A heterosexual married male politician
- d) An unmarried male politician

FEEDBACK

Social media can be an unpleasant place, for just about anyone. But certain groups are more likely to be attacked than others. Research shows that the more visible women are, the more likely they are to be attacked as part of a deliberate strategy to intimidate, silence and exclude them from engaging in political and public life.

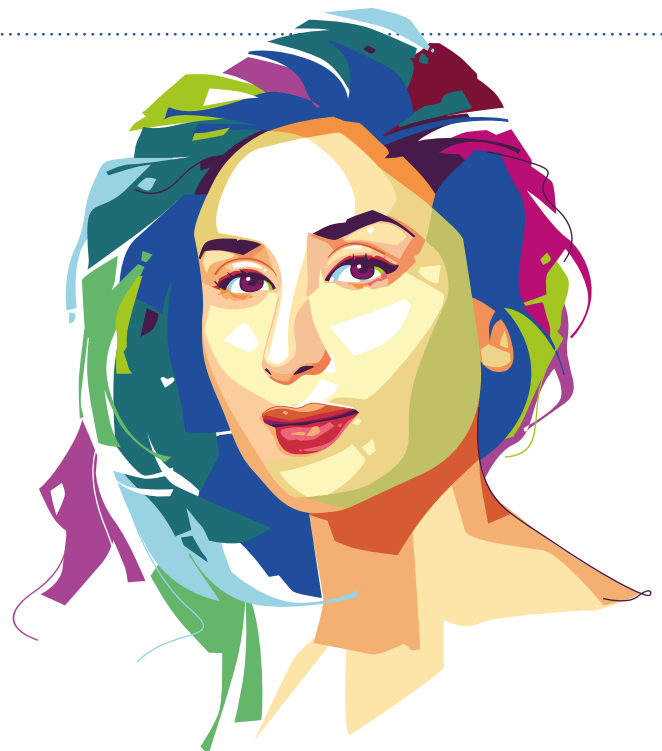
While a lot of attention has been given to high-profile women, including journalists and politicians, it's also true that women and girls who campaign locally receive online abuse. People who are perceived to be from outsider groups tend to receive more harassment. There's a section on intersectionality on page 12.

Men suffer from online abuse too, although it's rarely 'gendered'. Married, heterosexual men are still overwhelmingly the norm in positions of power. There are also false claims of victimhood. Some men will claim they are victims of 'cancel culture' in the media – or that they're worried about it – while clearly not being cancelled at all. Joe Rogan, the world's number one podcaster, who recently signed a reported \$250 million deal with Spotify has railed against cancel culture, as have several male heads of state, celebrities, and others.

Research shows that, the more visible the women are, the more likely they are to be attacked as part of a deliberate strategy to intimidate, silence and exclude them from engaging in political and public life.

A lot of anger and hatred was directed towards Kareena Kapoor Khan on X/Twitter after reports that she was offered the role of Sita Ma in a movie based on Ramayan.

SOURCE: [Why hatred for Kareena Kapoor Khan is Totally Justified and MUCH Needed](#)





KARSTEN WINEGEART | UNSPLASH

DEFINITIONS

Attention economy

Although the term was first coined in a 1971 article, (Designing organizations for an information-rich world), it is most closely associated with the digital era in which there is competition for attention, which can often lead to ‘shocking’ content produced by attention seeking, but not balanced, content. It has been claimed that the average Internet user is exposed to between 6,000 and 10,000 advertisements a day.



Research shows that, the more visible the women are, the more likely they are to be attacked as part of a deliberate strategy to intimidate, silence and exclude them from engaging in political and public life

GENDER DISINFORMATION ACROSS THE WORLD



Putin's calculated messaging is intended to demonstrate linkages in defending a shared national Russian identity rooted in traditional gender roles, norms, and expectations among Russian and Ukrainian men and women. His messaging is intended to 'other,' or establish an 'us versus them' mentality

Source: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/beyond-munitions-a-gender-analysis-for-ukrainian-security-assistance/#gender-analysis>

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

The birthplace of the internet is also the start point for much of the disinformation shared on it; more than two thirds of all Covid-19 disinformation in 2020 came from just 12 US-based accounts, known as the 'Dirty Dozen'. Also the home of many great factchecking resources and where the #metoo movement started.

SWEDEN RAPE 'CRISIS'

In 2013 inaccurate stories shared on Facebook linked '500% increases in rape' with 'third world' or 'Islamic immigration'. This was a false causal link: during this period there was an expanded legal definition of rape and more incidents of rape were reported generally. But there was no reported increase in incidents of rapes carried out by immigrants, according to research carried out by Reuters and others.

UNITED KINGDOM

With its linguistic and cultural ties to the USA, a lot of the disinformation coming out of Britain has an 'American' feel to it: Andrew Tate, for example, is a high-profile British-American misogynist and former kick boxer who charges young men thousands of dollars to learn his 'secrets of success'. But the messaging is similar to the US 'manosphere', and appears in many languages around the world. By contrast, the Everyday Sexism project has, since 2012, documented online and real world sexism around the world.

ISRAEL GAZA

The Israel Gaza conflict has seen an increase in disinformation: both sides have committed atrocities and been accused of spreading false information. Team Jorge is an Israeli group of contractors who have been accused by several news outlets of carrying out farm-run social media and automated disinformation campaigns.

KENYA, NIGERIA

Anglophone East Africa is awash with repurposed disinformation, much of it American in origin. An IWPR project in the region showed that churches and mosques were equally vulnerable to both fake health messaging and gender disinformation.

SUDAN, MOZAMBIQUE, MADAGASCAR, THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, AND MALI

Wagner Group disinformation targeted countries in Africa in much the same way it has targeted the US and many European countries: promoting discord and anti-Western messaging in areas affected by conflict.

UKRAINE

Russian disinformation about Ukraine is often bizarre and ranges from fake CNN and BBC broadcasts, to false stories about Satanism, to the accusation that Volodymyr Zelenskyy (who is Jewish) is a Nazi. Gender-specific disinformation campaigns attack LGBTQ and female activists and politicians. Russian disinformation accused Marianna Vyshemirsky, a pregnant woman whose photo went viral following Mariupol hospital bombing, was accused of being a 'crisis actor.' Several female Ukrainian journalists have been attacked online by Ukrainian right-wing groups too.

INDIA

According to Statista, India is the country most at risk of disinformation and misinformation. Much of this is political in nature and focuses on political messaging around Hindu Nationalism; women politicians and journalists in India have been a target for online disinformation and actual violence.

NORTH MACEDONIA, PHILIPPINES

'Troll farms' in these countries have amplified messaging for payment. During their peak, before the 2020 US presidential election, they reached 140 million Americans a month. Russian-backed trolls have targeted Moldova with anti-EU, anti-NATO and anti-Sanduu messaging which is still circulating. Platforms include Facebook and Telegram..

RUSSIA

While most countries can claim that their politicians have a history of being 'economical with the truth', there is a long Russian history of extreme disinformation. It was the Soviet era that gave us the word 'disinformation' – though the practice predates it – as well as a playbook of 'active measures'.

A peculiar feature of Russian disinformation campaigns is that their messaging can often seem contradictory or 'random'. It is not intended to offer a coherent world view, rather to cause confusion and distrust in institutions. Gender disinformation, therefore, tends to focus on controversial, divisive, and polarising topics that get people arguing, such as trans issues or homophobia. Disinformation campaigns also attack LGBTQ and female activists and make gender-based attacks on pro-EU politicians.

MYANMAR

An Amnesty report found that "Facebook's systems promoted violence against Rohingya... dangerous algorithms and reckless pursuit of profit substantially contributed to the atrocities [including gender-based violence] perpetrated by the Myanmar military against the Rohingya people in 2017".

Source: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/09/myanmar-facebooks-systems-promoted-violence-against-rohingya-meta-owes-reparations-new-report/>

TAIWAN

Seen to be one of the countries most at risk from political disinformation: examples include false stories that Taiwanese were being fed "poisonous" pork imported from the US secretly harvesting blood from citizens and giving it to the US to make a bioweapon to attack China. Its first female leader, President Tsai Ing-wen's, has 'featured' in deepfake videos.

DEFINITIONS

Gender ideology

A usually derogatory term to describe the idea that movements towards gender equality are in fact a neo-colonial tool of an international feminist conspiracy.

Crisis actor

The idea that certain events – often shootings, bombings, or massacres – portrayed in the news are 'staged incidents' played by 'crisis actors' isn't just for conspiracy theorists: a Russian disinformation campaign successfully generated doubt in audiences about chemical attacks in Syria, despite significant documentary evidence confirming they took place.

Proxy servers

A web server that sits between you and the rest of the internet, protecting your security and anonymity and 'spoofing' your location to get access to location restricted content from the web. Used to avoid censorship, amongst other things.

COVERING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

False information about the nature of gender-based violence (GBV) has a real impact on how the issues is perceived..

When GBV is reported badly, or not at all, survivors can be denied justice, because juries, and police have a false impression of the issue. Men will continue to carry out assaults with impunity. And those in charge of health resources will not fund clinics and support services.

Or to put it another way: with accurate reporting and clear, honest messaging around the subject, you can help ensure that these issues are addressed.

Gender-based violence is widespread and exists in every country in the world. And yet it is often a taboo subject. Because the subject is so commonly misunderstood.

Because GBV is rarely talked about openly it means that such myths often go unchallenged.

“Informed consent” occurs when someone fully understands the consequences of a decision and consents freely and without any force. The absence of informed consent is an element in the definition of GBV. There can be no consent in situations where any kind of force (physical violence, coercion, etc.) is used.



“She didn’t say no” is a common defence for acts of GBV. In many cases, she might say “yes” or would not say “no” because she feels threatened and fears for her own safety, her social status, or her life. It is assumed that children (under age 18) are unable to fully understand and make informed choices/give consent

Source: UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund)

SCENARIO EXERCISE

A Polish organisation called Patriots For Gender Justice have sent you a report which claims that a woman was raped by a Syrian refugee last week and that this has been covered up. They say that this has been happening all over Europe but is being covered up due to politically-correct EU and Moldovan politicians not wanting to offend foreigners. They have provided some statistics. As a news editor, with an interest in impartiality and accuracy, what should you do?

- Spend a lot of time following up the story and looking into their specific claims
- Run the story and use their statistics. It’ll take too many hours following up the story but if you quote them, it will be ok
- Get a junior reporter to do some initial desk research on this. It might make a useful feature on gender disinformation
- It’s not worth looking into: people who blame refugees for GBV have their own political agenda

FEEDBACK

This is clearly an emotional topic, and we would need to explore the facts in context. Gender-based violence is sadly something that exists around the world and in all communities.

A quick Google would allow you to factcheck the false statement that sexual violence by refugees is covered up by the media: in fact the reverse is true, and any kinds of criminal activity carried out by Syrians is very well documented. In fact far-right groups, populist politicians, and Russian-backed disinformation networks are among the groups which have amplified the widely available mainstream media stories, while at the same time claiming it has been covered up.

Given that there are more than 5 million Syrian refugees around the world, it is inevitable that some have carried out crimes. It’s equally true that women and girls fleeing conflict have in some cases been assaulted by people from the countries they have settled in.

So it’s true to say that blaming refugees for gender-based violence often fits in with a political agenda. It might be worth looking into: debunking this theory might make for a useful feature on how gender disinformation is part of the ‘populist playbook’.

MYTH	FALSE INTERPRETATION	BACKGROUND
“The woman seemed to offer no resistance...”	...and therefore she consented to the attack”	“Freezing” is a common response to such trauma, and this response has nothing to do with consent
Men are victims of violence too. Women are as likely as men to be perpetrators	Feminists and mainstream media ignore attacks on men.	Both men and women are victims of violence, globally; but women suffer from GBV much more than men
Women often make false accusations of rape by famous men	Women make false accusations in order to make a profit	Many women who have made accusations against famous men have had their careers destroyed even when they have been backed up by the courts; false accusations exist, but are regarded as rare
A ‘real’ sexual assault survivor always reports the attack immediately	People who don’t report attacks are making false allegations	Survivors are often traumatised and in shock, and their behaviour can be unpredictable
False sexual assault accusations are common	Women are automatically believed, and men’s reputations are destroyed overnight	It is very hard to prove sexual assault: court cases can be traumatic and many women do not make formal allegations as a result. Many systems differentiate between ‘false’ and ‘unfounded’ cases
Asylum seekers and immigrants have caused a spike in sexual assaults in places like Sweden	The mainstream media keep this quiet because they are scared of offending minorities due to political correctness	An increase in sexual assaults caused by a change in reporting methods was falsely blamed on immigrants; crimes committed by asylum seekers tend to be amplified
Most child sexual assaults are carried out by paedophilia rings	An elite group of abusers carries out attacks, and this is hushed up by the media	This fanciful conspiracy has a long history: using people’s genuine horror of this kind of abuse against opponents is a particularly cynical form of disinformation

DEFINITIONS

Gender-based violence (sometimes written as GBV)

Marital rape, forced prostitution, forced marriage, and sexual harassment are all forms of gender-based violence.

PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder)

A mental health condition caused by a traumatic experience, which often causes the sufferer to ‘relive’ the event. Symptoms vary, but can include flashbacks, nightmares, difficulty concentrating or sleeping, irritability and aggressive outbursts. Physical danger, such as gender-based violence, war or natural disasters can lead to PTSD – but so can situations such as receiving large amounts of abuse online.

Pizzagate

A thoroughly debunked and particularly fanciful conspiracy theory dating from c. 2016: that an aide of US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton operated a child sex trafficking ring from a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC

Retraumatization

The worsening of trauma symptoms as a result of being re-exposed to traumatic material; this can happen during journalistic interviews, or through consuming content with ‘triggering’ content.

DISINFORMATION AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

EDITOR'S NOTE

It takes years to build up a good 'news sense' as to what makes a true story, but once achieved it usually takes experienced editors seconds to sniff out a false story. More details in the IWPR Disinformation Handbook (p 32). Note that disinformation stories often used the most horrific crimes possible to get people angry: the medieval leaders who owed money to Jewish moneylenders didn't accuse them of stealing apples, they accused them of killing babies. Child abuse, rape, enforced gender realignment are amongst the accusations likely to stir up emotions. Kremlin propagandists falsely accused Ukraine of genocide and crucifixion, whilst calling President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a Nazi (even though he is Jewish).

Gender-based violence has always been an area where there has been a significant amount of misunderstanding and false information. It is a subject which is often taboo, and things like offender profiles and survivor behaviour can be very different to the comforting or 'common sense' understandings of the world. For example, it can be challenging for a society to admit that child abuse happens within a family, as opposed to being the result of outsiders.

This sometimes spills over into disinformation; a variety of groups have an interest in amplifying or distorting the way in which people understand this topic. Sometimes there are complex connections: far right groups, for example, seek to blame immigrants for violent sexual assault. Whereas anti EU political groups may seek to amplify this false messaging in order to promote discord. This disinformation may be 'innocently' shared, by people who are genuinely concerned for the safety of women in the community.

Sometimes it can be more subtle and hard to spot; some mens' rights groups have falsely claimed that women are as likely as men to carry out attacks, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Clearly not all men are responsible for violence against women: but to deny the fact that men are overwhelmingly responsible for family violence is false, and likely to make it harder to access justice in cases of family violence.

In all cases, similar factchecking techniques should be used.

CHECK THE SOURCE

Is it too good or bad to be true?
.....

Is there an obvious target?
.....

Is this a repackaged 'horror story'?
.....

Is the alleged cover up already in the public domain?
.....

Does the story tell a joke to confirm a narrative?
.....

It's something that makes people feel uncomfortable - that men are overwhelmingly responsible for the violence against women and their children

Source: <https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/who-perpetrates-domestic-violence/102034306>

SCENARIO EXERCISE

A high-profile international male actor has been accused of sexually assaulting a young female actor several years ago. Everyone else is covering the ongoing trial, and there's lots of speculation she is after his money. How should you cover it in your college magazine?

- You should write a think piece on how so many women these days are making money from false accusations, because it's got so easy to blame men. It's obvious he's innocent and the real victim, otherwise she would have accused him at the time
- You should write a think piece on how so many powerful men have successfully silenced accusers and covered up their tracks using the courts, PR teams, and hush money: he's obviously guilty
- You can use the trial as a news peg to discuss gender-based violence disinformation issues and what can be done about it. You could include information about the support services in your area for survivors of violence
- You should use the trial as a news peg to cover real cases of rape, which typically involve strangers attacking people as they walk home in dark places. Maybe a guide telling women what clothes to wear, as well as places and activities to avoid?



ISTOCK

DEFINITIONS

Populist playbook

Across the world a new kind of leader has emerged in recent decades, and their methods are seen to be closely related to a rise of social media: rather than seeking the middle ground, populists thrive on controversy. Entertainment, ratings, and simplistic slogans are more important than governance; hunch, intuition, feelings, and a particular appeal to ‘common sense values’ are more important than data and evidence. A mistrust of experts and academics is baked into this kind of politics, and it relies on an obsession with imagined enemies, outsider groups, and metropolitan elites.

Weaponised narratives

an attack that seeks to undermine an opponent’s civilization, identity, and will. By generating confusion, complexity, and political and social schisms, it confounds response on the part of the defender. (Source: [https:// weaponizednarrative.asu.edu](https://weaponizednarrative.asu.edu))

Vicarious trauma

People who spend a lot of time exposed to content that depicts or describes trauma – social media content moderators, for instance, or journalists who specialise in interviewing survivors of violence – are themselves at risk of being traumatised. You can develop professional strategies, such as establishing clear boundaries between work and social life, to lower the risk.

FEEDBACK

If you chose Option A or option D, you have possibly fallen victim to gender disinformation: or at least the common myths surrounding this issue. In fact, women who accuse powerful men of gender-based violence often suffer professionally, personally and financially. High-profile people are typically in a position to damage your career and harm your reputation. There have been several cases of powerful men using their influence to silence those who they have abused.

It is notoriously difficult to secure a conviction in historical abuse cases, and many survivors do not want to relive the trauma. Indeed, some have taken money and signed non-disclosure agreements meaning their cases will never go public. This explains why so many men – throughout history, and in a range of contexts – have got away with it for so long.

There are clearly some horrific incidents of assault involving strangers, but the data tells us that women are most likely to be attacked by someone they know, usually a partner. It is certainly responsible to make audiences aware of ‘stranger danger’ and encourage them to report attacks. But telling women what to wear can sound like victim-blaming and a distraction from the actual problem (of men who rape women).

Having said that, it would be irresponsible to say that the accused is guilty unless you can back this up with evidence. While relatively rare, false accusations do sometimes occur and those accused have a right to a reputation. Reporting restrictions for active trials exist to ensure that speculation does not prejudice a trial.

INTERVIEW

WITH EMILIA ȘERCAN

EDITOR'S NOTE

Emilia Șercan is an award-winning investigative journalist and lecturer. Despite international recognition for her work, she became the target of a smear campaign after her work exposed academic fraud committed by public figures in her native Romania.



In retrospect, my mistake was not to have gone public earlier. I spoke about six weeks after the events. If I would have done it earlier, probably things would have been very very different

Emilia Șercan's frontline is a library. She has spent years investigating academic fraud by some of the country's most powerful individuals: politicians including former prime minister Nicolae Ciucă, intelligence and army generals, police officers, professors, prosecutors and judges.

PhDs became important in Romania after the fall of communism. As universities proliferated, higher education qualifications became key to reaching the upper echelons of power. Plagiarism ballooned, allowing under-qualified people to rise to important positions and stay there.

"My first investigation, in 2015, into the doctoral thesis of [then Prime minister] Gabriel Oprea was triggered by curiosity," Șercan says. "It opened a Pandora's box. I discovered a network of people – powerful and in key positions – who had plagiarised their theses."

In eight years, Șercan has exposed over 50 individual cases of academic fraud among public figures, including former ministers from the governing National Liberal Party Sorin Cîmpeanu (education) and Lucian Bode (home affairs), General Dumitru Dumbravă of the Romanian Intelligence Service, and the police general and former interior minister Petre Tobă.

"I discovered plagiarised work by very powerful people. No one sued me, my articles were so powerful and evidence-based [but] they tried to eliminate me in other ways," Șercan says.

"At the beginning [in 2015] the system reacted in a way I did not expect: they cut access to doctoral dissertations at the National Library. Until then I was there every week. I just had to fill in a request and I was handed the material in ten minutes.

"Then they changed the rules. PhD dissertations can still be consulted in the libraries of the faculties or universities where the paper was defended. But with no access at the National Library, the research possibilities are reduced."

The limitations hindered Șercan's work, but did not stop it.

"It is not so complicated to discover the fraud in these works because [their authors] plagiarised so badly. Once I discovered 73 pages directly copied and pasted verbatim from another source," she says.

In 2019, Șercan received death threats after revealing cases of plagiarism in Romania's national police academy. A Bucharest court later sentenced the rector, Adrian Iacob, and his deputy, Mihail Marcoci, to a three-year suspended jail term for pressuring a subordinate into threatening her.

In January 2022, Șercan published an investigation in the independent media outlet

PressOne revealing that Prime Minister Ciucă, a former four-star general, had plagiarised content in 42 out of 138 pages of his 2003 doctoral thesis on military science.

Around a month later, Șercan received an anonymous Facebook message, warning her that five private photos of her had been uploaded to adult websites. The photos had been taken 20 years earlier, in the privacy of her home, by her then-fiancée. Șercan reported this to the police the next morning, sharing a screenshot of the message.

Later that day, the same screenshot appeared on the Moldovan website realitateadimoldova.md. When Șercan asked who was behind the leak, the Romanian police pointed to a "ghost" site, patrianoastra.com, as the source.

Șercan then sent a letter to the country's political leaders, including the president, the prime minister, the home affairs minister, the police chief and attorney general, pointing out that data from a criminal file had been leaked and someone was trying to cover it up. The day after she sent the letter, [patrianoastra](http://patrianoastra.com) was taken down.

The sequence of events points to police officers and politicians being involved. Șercan consulted independent cybersecurity experts including Qurium, a Sweden-based digital rights foundation: a forensic search of her mobile phone found no evidence of hacking, suggesting the screenshots could only have been leaked by police.

"I never shared [the screenshot] with anyone else. I felt lost. I asked myself who I could turn to for protection if the police had leaked evidence from a criminal file," Șercan says.

"It was a kompromat operation, an attempt at moral assassination."

The leak and the cover-up were followed by attempts from the prosecutor's office to bury the case and close it. But in the meantime, Șercan's case had gained publicity, meaning it couldn't be ignored.

"In retrospect, my mistake was not to have gone public earlier," she says. "I spoke about six weeks after the events. If I had done it earlier, things would probably have been very different.

"I don't know how to say it, I was ashamed. These were personal pictures in my house ... you don't want other people to see how you are in your private house, wrapped in a towel after the shower. I felt guilty somehow, instead of thinking that the problem was not the pictures, but the fact that someone stole and disseminated them.

"I tried to follow the legal path. I tried to go to the authorities, the ones that are empowered to protect me as a citizen. But the Romanian



authorities transformed into my aggressors. This was a very important lesson for me.

“One of the ways to protect ourselves is to speak out publicly, even if it may be about things that make us feel vulnerable, guilty or ashamed.”

Şercan is glad that the attempt to “morally assassinate” her did not succeed. But she regrets losing time she could have otherwise spent on doing her job as a journalist. “Up until 2021 I published about 26 articles per year – in 2022 I published only 12 and some were related to my

case,” she says. “In 2023 I published seven and four were related to my case.”

“Speaking publicly is important. For me it became a form of protection. It could also have a perverse effect, because some journalists could end up self-censoring themselves to avoid going through what happened to me. [But] I hope that other colleagues will feel stronger in light of my case and do their jobs without any pressure.”

DEFINITIONS

Trigger warning

A trigger warning is a statement made in advance of sharing content that can be disturbing to some audiences: for example topics like self-harm, sexual abuse, or violence. Warnings can take many forms, and should be linked to audience expectations: for example, some broadcasters have a ‘watershed’ at 9 pm after which programming often features more ‘adult’ themes. Our trigger warning comes in the form of a disclaimer on page 2.

The Bechdel test

What started as a joke in a comic strip in 1985 became something of a phenomenon within media studies. The rules are simple: for a movie to pass it must have “at least two women in it, who talk to each other, about something other than a man.” Various studies have highlighted how many movies fail, and have proposed that the under-representation of women in movies contributes to gender disinformation.

Media literacy

The extent to which audiences can successfully access and analyse media messaging; important to consider when planning your campaign: some audiences expect sophisticated word play, cultural references, and in-jokes that might alienate others.

DISINFORMATION AGAINST LGBTQ COMMUNITIES

Gender disinformation has a disproportionate impact on marginalised communities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) individuals, worsening the discrimination they already face.

Anti-gender identity movements have demonstrated the capacity to mobilise broad public support against legal and policy reform on priority issues for LGBTQ and feminist campaigners, including same-sex partnerships, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), abortion rights, and trans rights. They have also demonstrated significant power to set political agendas and frame societal developments.

Online disinformation and vitriol has surged exponentially: social media amplify false claims and slurs against the community, spreading at light speed and triggering extreme online responses, including incitements to violence on claims that the community is a danger to society. These campaigns frequently use fear-based fake news and violent and discriminatory language to reinforce stereotypes, patriarchal systems of oppression and binary approaches towards gender and sex.

In the name of traditional values and religious principles, some groups weaponise anti-LGBTQ disinformation to discredit activists who call for equal rights, while political goals drive others to invoke homophobic tropes in a bid to defame their opponents.

The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) said in 2023 that anti-LGBTQ misinformation and disinformation was particularly prolific and “often incites hate against minorities, laws and institutions”.

Disinformation stems from both conspiracy theories and current issues, such as the passing of legislation in specific countries, as happened with the recent ratification of the Istanbul Convention in Moldova. Critics claimed it would pave the way to same-sex marriages.

False stories describe LGBTQ people as mentally sick, as paedophiles, as violent and perpetrators of mass shootings, while conspiracy theories talk about the “dictatorship” of LGBTQ+ philosophy and “indoctrination”. In 2022 for example the World Health Organization (WHO) detected an outbreak of monkeypox and false stories claiming it was a disease only concerning gays started spreading across Europe.

Conspiracy theories are extremely diverse and cover different topics. Messages are often used to portray the West as corrupt and imposing its ideology by force or by devious methods.

One of the most common stories in this vein is that several countries are banning the words “father”, “mother”, “boy” or “girl” in common use, laws and educational settings or that others are reintroducing them after they had been eliminated, although this had never happened. This is the case of the Italian government, led by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, who is falsely claimed (in Italy, Spain and Poland among others) to have abolished the classification “parent 1” and “parent 2” or the “third gender” from Italian documents, although these terms never appeared in the first place.

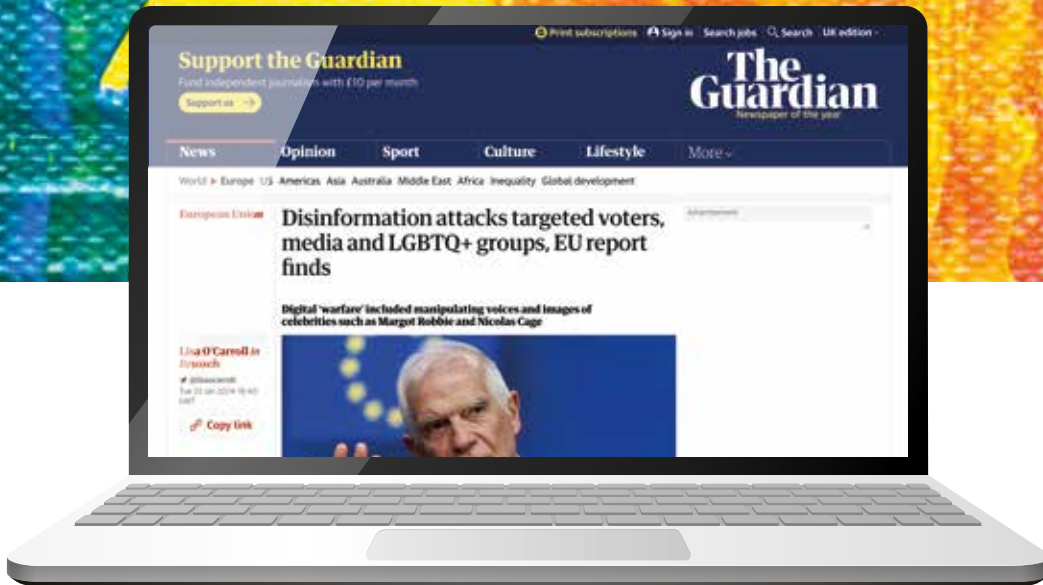
Russia has been at the forefront of state actors fuelling anti-LGBTQ disinformation; its narratives have found fertile soil across Europe and beyond. Under President Vladimir Putin, the Russian government has increasingly targeted the community for political ends, leading a drive to crack down on “non-traditional” lifestyles that are defined as evidence of Western moral decay. In 2013 Russian Duma passed a law outlawing the promotion of “gay propaganda” to minors and in November 2023 Russia’s Supreme Court banned the “LGBT movement” declaring it “extremist”.

For instance, pro-Russian government outlets in both Czechia and Slovakia repeatedly published articles on the topic of sexuality education. Analysing such articles in the period 2007-2016, researcher Lucie Jarkovská identified coordinated efforts to misrepresent guidelines, demonise advocates for sexuality education and instil a sense of panic. Similarly, in Croatia, during the debate about introducing comprehensive school-based sexuality education, the anti-gender movement distributed leaflets arguing that sexuality education promotes child sex abuse, homosexuality and is against family values.

The leap from online slurs to real-life danger is at the forefront of campaigners’ minds.

Given the rapid evolution of social media and the acceleration of anti-LGBTQ disinformation campaigns, relevant legal and policy frameworks are inadequate to address the impact on the community and contain the polarisation within the society. As a result, groups and institutions that spread and weaponise gender and anti-LGBTQ disinformation for their own political, economic or personal end are rarely held accountable.

In the face of such disinformation, media reporting should not claim to be neutral: any failure to confront anti-LGBTQ disinformation reinforces the status quo. The media can support attempts to tackle these problems by trying to dispel the gender and homophobic stereotypes



on which anti-LGBTQ disinformation feeds, and by making anti-LGBTQ disinformation the subject of its reporting.

What to do about it

The scale of this challenge is significant. Gender disinformation campaigns have shown the capacity to mobilize broad public support against legal and policy reform, whether focused on issues specific to LGBTQ communities, or on broader issues related to a country's pro-western orientation, like in the cases of Moldova and Georgia. The main aim of these tactics is to widen the social divide, create polarisation to destabilise coalitions or make governments fearful of backlash if they implement specific policy objectives.

Journalists can do the following:

1. Adopt LGBTQ-sensitive reporting techniques

Given prevalent stereotypes and the discrimination against LGBTQ communities, reporters cannot simply claim to be neutral to their plight, as media reporting either reinforces LGBTQ stereotypes or challenges them. One way in which the media can challenge gendered disinformation against the LGBTQ community is by challenging the stereotypes on which it feeds through gender-sensitive reporting.

LGBTQ-sensitive reporting can be achieved by:

- Selecting sources and stories in order to achieve a balanced presence of women and men, reflecting the composition of society and human experiences
- Using LGBTQ-sensitive language
- Avoid treating LGBTQ communities only as victims, and instead represent them as people with agency who take active steps to improve their lives
- Cover the stories of LGBTI people and the events happening to them when it's not bad news. There are so many positive

developments, led by the advocacy and activism of LGBT people.

- Seek to portray LGBT people as seeking special rights, but instead to represent their campaigns in search of human rights
- Providing a platform for LGBTQ communities, including through interviews

2. Make gendered disinformation against LGBTQ groups the story

The media can highlight gendered disinformation by investigating and reporting on specific campaigns in a critical manner, interviewing experts in disinformation, gender and LGBTQ experts to provide analysis.

Journalists can:

- Make sure they are aware of and liaise with broader coalitions and organisations focused on anti-LGBTQ disinformation coalitions, organisations
- Report accurate data about LGBTQ-focused disinformation
- Make sure they are talking to the right person/organisation by checking activists' backgrounds before assuming they are experts or represent the collective
- Before disclosing the sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression of a subject, ask if it is relevant to the story. If journalists would not include this information if the subject was heterosexual, then it is not relevant
- Unless a person is public about their sexual orientation, gender identity or sexual characteristics, avoid identifying an LGBT person as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, or as part of the LGBTI community without express permission first



DISINFORMATION AGAINST LGBTQ COMMUNITIES

CONTINUED



FACT CHECK

Claim: “Concrete forces that oppose freedom and truth are trying to achieve their goals by destroying traditional, family values and turning to false freedom - for example, with LGBT propaganda, by trying to legalise gender reassignment for minor children bypassing their parents”

Status: False

Background: This is a false statement, which reflects the proliferation of gender disinformation against LGBTQ communities. Often disseminated through Russian language and pro-Kremlin Georgian language channels. While this homophobic rhetoric is rooted in religious and nationalist sentiments, ironically, it is fairly global.

Campaigns have focused on sex education, with allegations that “the West legitimises pedophilia, that school-based sex education contributes to the perversion of adolescents, that gender identity is changed in the West without parental consent, and that children are being removed from conservative families that consider homosexuality unacceptable.” In fact, you can hear these sentiments in Uganda and India; and in the West itself, where, in countries like the US, ‘the West’ is switched with ‘a liberal elite’. In fact these homophobic sentiments often have their origins in Conservative and evangelical movements.

Much of the disinformation against Ukraine in Georgia has included homophobic content, including the notion that Ukraine’s fight against the Russian invasion was primarily a fight for homosexual rights. Pro-Kremlin actors used the false dilemma technique presenting Orthodox Russia as a counterweight to the “perverted West” – a fighter against “LGBT-zation.” Liberals, LGBTQI people, and promoting homosexuality are portrayed as the main threat to children: narratives focused on teaching equality issues, sexual education in formal and non-formal settings and the country’s anti-discrimination law, which is portrayed as violating children’s rights.

Georgian-language sources have tended to focus on spreading false information against prominent local actors, including journalists, politicians, civic activists. Prominent Georgian female politicians and their associates have been attacked using sexual morality themes, including the President of Georgia Salome Zourabichvili, and the mother of the imprisoned third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili. Journalists in media outlets that were critical of the government have been attacked with homophobic slurs, as have leaders of anti-government protests.

Far-right organisations like “Eri, Raoba, Imedi” (Nation, Identity, Hope in Georgian, acronym is ERI, nation) have accused the collective West of violating Georgian traditions and the institution of the family. In a broadcast on “Eri Media”, on July 9, 2023, its leader, Levan Vasadze, appealed to national-religious sentiments, after the failed Tbilisi Pride on July 8, demanding authorities interrogate all foreign ambassadors who were “provocateurs” and “fighting against the will of the Georgian nation” because they supported the Tbilisi Pride festival.

SOURCE

Statement by Georgia’s Prime Minister Irakli Gharibashvili, who attended the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Hungary, May 4, 2023,



PRACTICAL: PLANNING A

CAMPAIGN

Putting into practice gender disinformation concepts

Audience led campaigning. Be clear on your core message/s

Try and avoid vague messaging by being specific about your aims, messages, and audience.

‘Raising awareness of gender issues online’ is a vague aim, for example. Whereas ‘exposing how disinformation against women in power is amplified amongst in Moldova by Russia-based accounts’ is more focused.

Think about the PESO model

PESO is short for Paid, earned, shared, owned, and is used to describe media: it’s useful to think about when planning and commissioning campaigns. ‘Paid-for’ media is traditional advertising and sponsored advertorial content; ‘earned and shared’ media is user-generated content and social media about a brand; and ‘owned’ media might include a company blog, official YouTube channel, or website fully controlled by an organisation.

Use the language of your audience

Sometimes the ‘countering disinformation industry’ can use academic language, technical terms, and jargon that can alienate or confuse your audiences. It’s often better to use plain language and short sentences: if you do need to use unfamiliar terms, try to explain them as you use them.

Select your role models carefully

Learn from the advertising industry: they know that people will listen to people who audiences can relate to. Building up relationships with influential people who are trusted by audiences can be useful. You need to choose these carefully and reach outside of your natural peer group.

Don’t assume your audience is like you

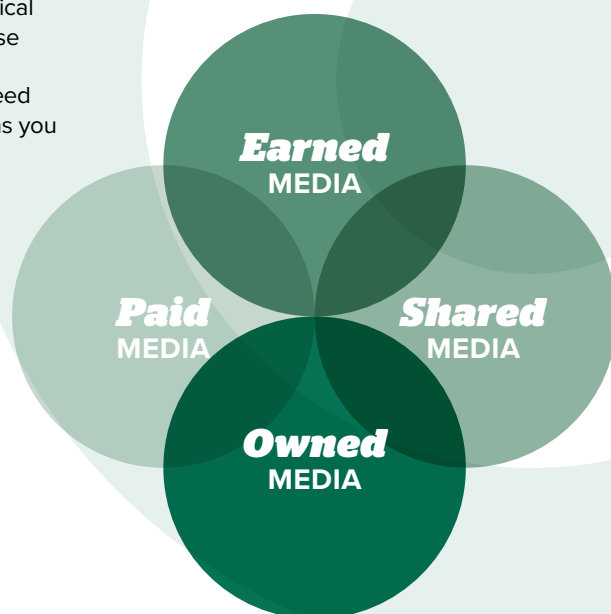
When you are campaigning on issues you strongly believe in, it can be easy to end up in an echo chamber, where everybody agrees with your ideas. Think about your target audience. What motivates them? What media do they consume? How much change are they able to make?

Learn, review and feedback

Try to capture, review, and learn from both your successes and failures. Try and focus group your messages before you go live and get feedback from people outside of your peer group.



50 per cent of the conversation around Amber had been inauthentically generated.”
Alexi Mostrous, ‘Who Trolled Amber’ podcast (which looked at full time trolls and Saudi government involvement in social media around Johnny Depp/Amber Heard court case)



SOURCE

There is much more on behaviour change theory in the IWPR disinformation handbook: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/print-publications/moldova-disinformation-handbook>

‘Russian World ideology is destructive’ Church Times
<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2022/25-march/comment/opinion/russian-world-ideology-is-destructive>

61%

of Moldovans find it difficult to distinguish between fake and real news

SOURCE: https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/2019-02/03_INTERNEWS_Final%20report_25.10.18_EN-web.pdf

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You have seen a message on Telegram which says that EU officials are proposing laws to force countries to make paedophilia legal as part of a LGBTQ agenda. What's the best way to counteract it?

- A research-led multichannel campaign to involve TV, celebrity endorsement, and a long-term social media campaign which involves several testable messages.
- A simple correction is all that's required: once people have the facts they'll change their minds.
- An opinion piece in the *Church Times*.
- A youth led podcast series.

FEEDBACK

This entirely false story has sadly been promoted by some Russian channels. So what can you do about it?

One natural reaction is to do a traditional 'factcheck' statement. You could explain that there is no evidence for this false claim, for example, and let your audience know that there is no country in Europe where paedophilia is legal. Perhaps if people were rational beings guided by logic, this would be enough!

Real life anti-disinformation campaign planning is more complex. In fact, most people don't like being corrected, particularly if they have been exposed many times to false messages. Remember that people often share things that make them angry, so wild false claims often travel further than the boring old truth. At worst, like being told to 'calm down', it often makes the situation worse, which is why the Internet sometimes seems to be so full of people arguing over facts. This is an important lesson to learn when planning a campaign.

A podcast can be a good way of doing a deep dive into this topic. There are some good anti-disinformation podcasts in the resources section of this handbook. The challenge is that this format traditionally doesn't attract huge audiences in Moldova, and perhaps not those most vulnerable to this particular message.

An opinion piece in a church newspaper might work. In this way you can target specific audiences: you need to look at the reason the disinformation has spread. Perhaps in this case the story seems to have been targeted at people who hold 'traditional' values, perhaps older people who don't have good online verification skills.

It's important to understand the motivation behind this kind of messaging and the 'false opposition' they are trying to put into people's understanding. The aim is to try to get people to distrust the EU and to promote the 'Russian World Ideology (Русский мир)', the idea that Russia alone can protect 'traditional values' from 'the decadent West'. By linking the Orthodox Church to this idea, the false idea that all believers are against united against the West can become normalised. They want to promote an 'us versus them' world view in which militant secularism want to crush orthodox unity, the gay community want to destroy the family, and so on.

It's false, of course: many people in the Orthodox church are firmly against Russian World Ideology. Many Orthodox Christians have spoken out against the use of their faith to justify hate crimes and invasions, both informally and in official statements like the Volos Declaration which describes the Russian World Ideology as heresy: it was signed by 1600 theologians and clerics, within the Orthodox Church, including many Russians. So reaching out to trusted religious leaders can potentially be useful.

A multichannel campaign guided by research into audience preferences can sometimes be a 'gold standard', but of course very expensive and therefore unrealistic without a huge budget. Remember that some of the most successful grass roots campaigns – like the #metoo movement – started small and changed through time. In this incidence there is also a real danger you could amplify the story.

DEFINITIONS

#MeToo movement

The movement (and hashtag) originate from a 2006 grass roots campaign, started by US social activist Tarana Burke. It became a global phenomenon a decade later, after a number of sexual assault survivors named their attacker: from Bălți to Bangalore, many others shared their stories.

Digital divide

The gap between those who access the Internet and those who don't; even in middle income countries, many people do not have regular access to the Internet. Factors can include age, income levels, and access to Wi-Fi.

'Gayrope' (Гейропа)

Mixes Europe and gay to make a word which has come to be used as a homophobic slur. Often used in conjunction with the false idea that a mysterious European project seeks to destroy the family. Ironic, given that Peter the Great partially decriminalised homosexuality in 1716, and again in 1922: when homosexuality was illegal in virtually all of Western Europe. Also, there are definitely homophobes (and persecuted gender minorities) in Western Europe who would be surprised at this characterisation...

AVOIDING GENDER DISINFORMATION:

SUMMARY



Relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which misogyny also intersects with misinformation and violent extremism in the online world

SOURCE: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/>

What is gender disinformation?

Gender disinformation refers to deliberately generated false information, coordinated and with a specific purpose: for example, spreading inaccurate rumours or deepfake content about women politicians in order to discourage them from participating in public life.

Note: *Gender disinformation* is sometimes referred to as *gendered disinformation*, or *gender-based disinformation*. In this context, 'gender' refers to social, psychological, cultural, and behavioural rather than biological definitions of gender.

Why does it exist? And why is it important?

There are a range of motivations and types of disinformation. Research suggests that gender disinformation exists to:

- Discourage women from entering politics generally
- Target particular individuals over specific issues, such as journalists who expose the wrongdoings of people in power
- Gain popular support for particular political systems (and to discredit tolerant values) through amplifying content likely to offend or ridicule gender minorities
- Use sensitive topics to divide and polarise communities

How is disinformation spread?

All kinds of content can be used to create gender disinformation. False stories, Telegram posts, memes, jokes, and TikTok videos have all been used.

State actors do not always generate original content, and amplify existing false content as part of their strategy; but they do sometimes create quite sophisticated deepfake content and even fake news reports.

Who is responsible for generating gender disinformation?

Religious groups, politicians, corporations, and people and organisations acting on behalf of states can all generate disinformation while anyone with a social media account can disseminate it: of course both the mainstream beauty industry and branches of alternative wellness industry have all been accused of disinformation, misinformation, and outright lies...

Who is the target?

Female politicians and journalists are particular targets of gender disinformation and anyone in the public eye can be exposed to harassment

and false stories: pop star Taylor Swift, former Prime Minister of Finland Sanna Marin, and millions of regular people in the community have been victims. Gender non-conforming people and marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals are often particular targets.

Is this a new phenomenon?

The history of misogyny, discrimination, politically-motivated stories and gender myths goes back thousands of years but the social media age has made it easier to falsify stories and to spread them. Researchers have noted a recent rise in gender disinformation disseminated by authoritarian regimes, in particular targeting minorities in opposition to 'traditional' values which certain leaders claim to 'defend'.

How can you spot gender disinformation?

What's the source? Think about the 'w' questions to find out if the story is true. Who originally created the meme, clip, story, or image? Where did it come from? Look out for pages which are about Moldova but originate in another country.

Watch out for images which have been **falsely labelled**.

Deepfake video and audio can be very convincing: which is why you should always look beyond the clip and think about context.

Think about the emotional impact of the story. Do you feel anger, outrage, fear? Disinformation often is often designed to provoke strong emotions: people share material when they are angry and forget to factcheck.

There's more on factchecking in the [Disinformation Handbook](#).

What can you do about gender disinformation?

Develop excellent verification techniques: once you can easily spot disinformation, you are unlikely to share it.

Call out false information, both through simple factchecks, and longer rebuttals in a range of formats.

Journalists and communicators can **avoid stereotypes in the way they tell gender stories**. **Speak to people from all sides.**

Use accurate and appropriate language and use terms that are non-discriminatory. Select stories carefully: given that gender disinformation is often designed to be divisive



and negative about outsider groups, **your positive stories can be a counterbalance to the 'weaponised narratives'** (p 25) which are sometimes used as part of gender disinformation stories.

Be sensitive in your communication with those who have not developed good factchecking skills: good people sometimes share bad information, unwillingly. And even if the information is false, it typically plays upon fears which are real.

Stay positive

Gender debates can sometimes get angry, because content has been designed to be divisive: often this is to create a false idea of sensible, traditional values versus outlandish plots to force alternative 'Western' or 'European' values on ordinary people. Remember that people don't like being contradicted.

Stay safe

People who speak out on gender issues are often targeted online so you need to learn basic digital security to stay safe. The risks and methods to combat them are constantly evolving, so you will need to keep your knowledge, and your software, up-to-date.

For more on digital security techniques please go to the IWPR's Cyber Resilience Handbook: <https://academy.iwpr.net/handbooks-store/cyber-resilience-guidebook>

DEFINITIONS

Astroturfing

Whereas a grassroots movement or campaign is one which develops organically and naturally because of users, astroturfing is a technique used by disinformers to imitate this in order to gain support for a product, ideology, or cause. Russian trolls have been caught faking protests, and Chinese authorities have used Facebook and X/Twitter for this kind of disinformation.

False dilemma

Also known as a false binary, this is a logical fallacy in which two falsely constructed notions are set against each other. Whereas conflict resolution involves seeking common ground, false dilemmas are often used to divide groups with the intention of promoting a particular ideology in opposition to another. Gender disinformers sometimes set what they describe as 'traditional gender values' against 'gender ideology', associating false or exaggerated claims for both groups.

Behaviour change theory

The exploration of how we change our minds; there are a few different models, but most involve the idea that we go through stages of change, from awareness of an issue through to making changes and potentially to advocacy. Attitudes, role models, calls to action, and barriers to change are all factors in how we change our minds.



RESOURCES

Atalanta - [Anti]Social Media, [The benefits and pitfalls of digital for female politicians](#), March 2018

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Caselli, Irene - [Bullets, threats of rape and disinformation in Italy](#) - Coda Story, 30 August 2019

Di Meo, Lucina - [Monetizing Misogyny, Gendered Disinformation and the Undermining of Women's Rights and Democracy Globally](#). #ShePersisted, February 2023.

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