



CENTRE for
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RESILIENCE

HOLDING OUR DIGITAL GROUND

A Playbook to Mitigate Gendered Disinformation During
Elections and Beyond

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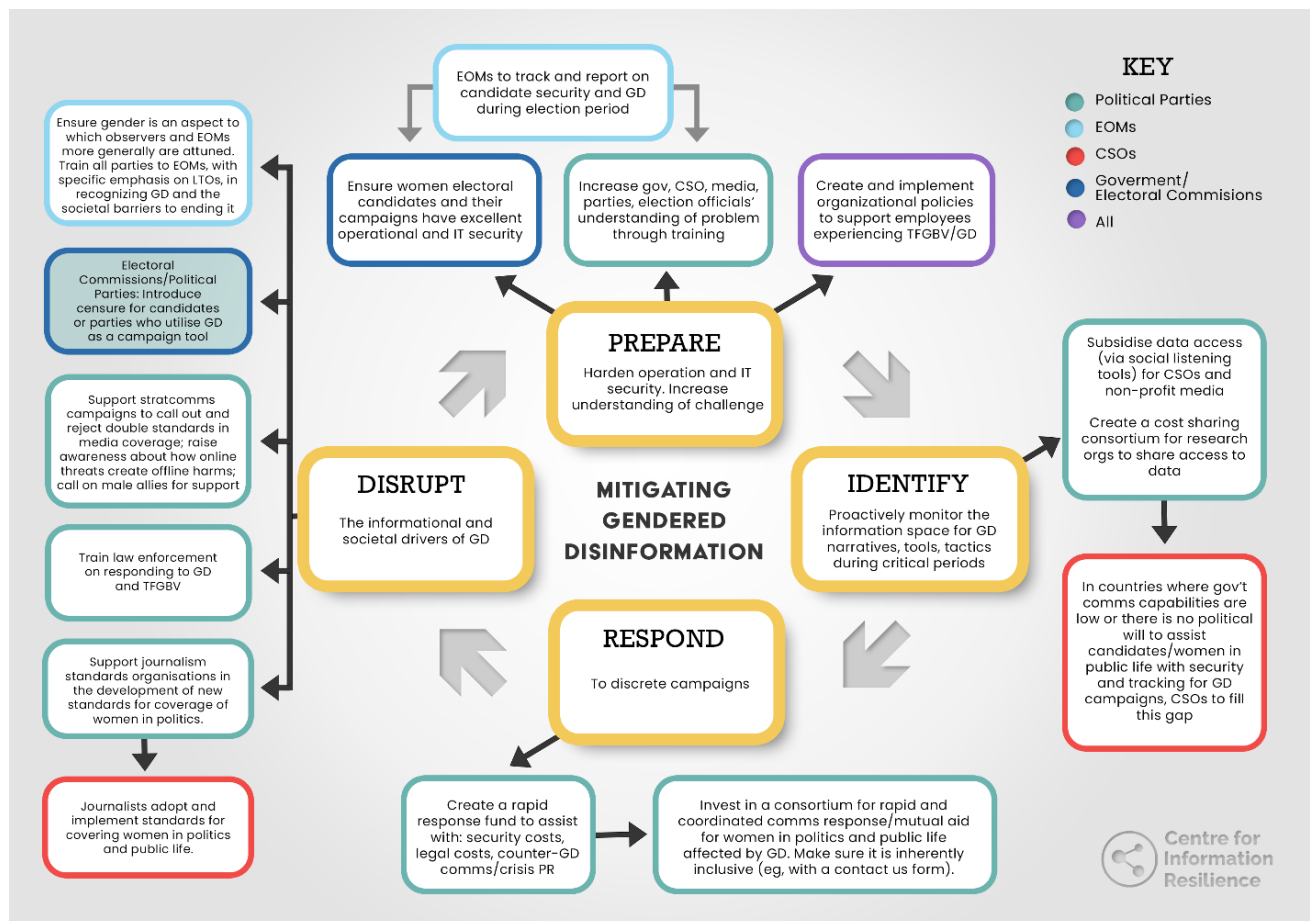
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE AND NEED

With dozens of countries holding elections in 2024, gendered disinformation is one of many threats to women’s participation in the political process and public life. Defined as the use of **“false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives [deployed] against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere”**.

Gendered disinformation can be used to: **undermine electoral integrity and access to information, roll back gender equality, hasten democratic backsliding, or in malign foreign influence campaigns** to undermine democracies worldwide.

Those who employ gendered disinformation narratives seek to: belittle women, objectify women, sully their reputations, and/or undermine their credibility.



This playbook provides a reference point for how gendered disinformation works, offers real-world case studies to illustrate key aspects of this problem, and outlines possible responses to gendered disinformation challenges in four areas - technical, organisational, informational, and societal - for democratic-minded governments and partners, including civil society, to utilise and consider. The focus of this document is on solutions that governments can pursue in the short and medium-term, not regulatory solutions that require the approval of legislatures.

THEMES, NARRATIVES, TOOLS, AND TECHNIQUES

Three key themes of gendered disinformation in the context of elections and political processes are nearly universal across information spaces: the objectification of women (especially via sexualisation); sexism; and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles based on social norms and stereotypes.

Key narratives include speculation about a woman's fitness for office, commentary on a woman's reproductive or parental status, transphobic or antifeminist narratives, and allegations of a woman's alignment with broader global conspiracies.

Purveyors of gendered disinformation may use anonymous/pseudonymous or fake accounts, generative AI, manipulated imagery to support their narratives. Further, offline techniques can support gendered disinformation and further the goal of pushing women out of public life, including: SWATting, doxing, violent threats, cyberstalking hate speech, hack and leak operations, and the use of strategic litigation ("lawfare").

CHALLENGES

There are many challenges to implementing programmes that identify and mitigate gendered disinformation. This year, as Trust and Safety teams at social media platforms are hollowed out, and addressing disinformation more broadly has become politicised, these obstacles have become more numerous and thornier. They include:

- Candidates for public office and government officials sometimes lack basic cyber hygiene, IT security, and physical security practices, leaving them vulnerable to attacks.
- Social media platforms have recently closed or monetised their Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), which has rendered the proactive tracking of gendered disinformation campaigns and early/rapid response difficult.
- Election administrators, officials, and election observers lack access to or budget to subscribe to social listening tools, and/or do not have the staff trained to use them.

- Organisations (government, CSOs, newsrooms, and others) often lack policies to support targets of gendered disinformation or broader online violence.
- Candidates for office and some officials lack the funds or expertise to: mobilise communications campaigns that can respond to or drown out gendered disinformation, respond to frivolous lawsuits, and keep themselves physically secure.
- Governments and law enforcement officers lack awareness of what gendered disinformation is, and that in some contexts it may be adjacent to illegal activity.
- Allies – government communicators, CSOs, international organisations and others – are siloed, and do not have pre-existing, proactive channels through which to share information about and organise against gendered disinformation.
- Media outlets often fall victim to gendered stereotypes and framing when reporting on men and women seeking political office and in elected positions.
- Gendered disinformation and the broader phenomenon of online violence are becoming normalised, and powerful institutions are reticent to publicly address the problem of gendered disinformation because anti-democratic forces have made doing so costly.

RESPONSES

CIR views the interventions needed to identify and mitigate gendered disinformation in four phases:

- **Prepare** by hardening operational and IT security of target individuals, and increase governments' awareness of the challenge, and design and implement employee support policies.
- **Identify** by proactively monitoring the information space for gendered disinformation narratives, tools, and techniques. Create mechanisms to share data access, rapid response coordination and alerts.
- **Respond** to discrete gendered disinformation campaigns through coordinated strategic communications efforts. Empower and fund rapid response mechanisms and coordinated communications campaigns.
- **Disrupt** the cultural, political, and societal architecture that makes gendered disinformation possible. Create and lobby for media and political party codes of conduct, training and funding for trauma-informed law enforcement responses, awareness building campaigns, and programs to cultivate allyship.

2. INTRODUCTION

In 2024, the world votes. Over two billion people – more than half of the world’s voting population – will have the opportunity to cast ballots in elections in over 80 countries.¹ While women are running for office in many of these contests, progress toward gender parity in politics is slow; UN Women estimates that equal representation in legislative bodies will not be achieved before 2063.² Along with broad socioeconomic and cultural barriers that make it difficult for women to enter politics, many cite a relentless storm of gendered online harms as a reason they self-censor, leave public life, or do not pursue public-facing positions in the first place.

Gendered disinformation – defined in 2020 by the Wilson Center as the use of “false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives [deployed] against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere”³ – is one of these harms.⁴ It can be used to undermine **electoral integrity and access to information, roll back gender equality, hasten democratic backsliding, or in malign foreign influence campaigns to undermine democracies worldwide**. Those who employ gendered disinformation narratives seek to belittle women, objectify women, sully their reputations, and/or to broadly undermine their credibility.

Gendered disinformation is part of the broader toolkit of identity-based disinformation, “a form of disinformation that uses misleading or false allegations relating to gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, religion, and other identity-based characteristics to undermine, silence, and/or repress marginalised communities and thereby weaken democracies.”⁵ Individuals with intersectional or overlapping marginalised identities often face compounded attacks.⁶ Finally, emerging

1 Livingstone (4 March 2024) The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/23/2024-global-elections-tracker-voting-dates-us-india-indonesia-belarus-haiti-pakistan-full-list>

2 UN Women (18 September 2023) Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures>

3 Jankowicz et al, (January 2021) The Wilson Center, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>

4 Gendered disinformation tactics are often employed alongside tactics of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), an “act that is committed or amplified using digital tools or technologies causing physical, sexual, or psychological, social, political, or economic harm to women or girls because of their gender.” (UN Women, Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/faqs/tech-facilitated-gender-based-violence>)

5 Centre for Information Resilience (2023) Not yet published.

6 Jankowicz et al, (January 2021) The Wilson Center, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>; and Global Engagement Center (March 2023), “Gendered Disinformation: Tactics, Themes, and Trends by Foreign Malign Actors,” U.S. Department of State. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/gendered-disinformation-tactics-themes-and-trends-by-foreign-malign-actors/>

technologies such as generative AI radically enable the creation and dissemination of false content; this poses a threat to the women and marginalised communities in politics worldwide.⁷ This is key in gendered disinformation. As more women seek power, the more they face public abuse.

The use of gendered disinformation is not just a gender equality issue; it is also a **national security threat**. Multiple investigations and studies have found the tactic is used by authoritarian states, including Russia, China, and Iran, in order to endanger reformers, opposition figures, democratic activists, or more generally to negatively influence public discourse against targets of authoritarian governments.⁸ Further, a study by the Ukrainian NGO, Detector Media showed that pro-Russian social networks promoted gendered disinformation targeting Ukrainian women since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁹ Russia's targeting of Ukrainian women had broad impacts.¹⁰ Detector Media argues that gendered disinformation which dehumanises Ukrainian women as willing sex-objects and as traitors to their country, has likely contributed to an online culture normalising and minimising the sexual violence that Ukrainian women have been subjected to during the ongoing war.¹¹ Overall, by amplifying the misogyny present in societies, authoritarian governments can disrupt democratic processes and manipulate political outcomes.

Increasingly, gendered disinformation is also used in the context of **democratic backsliding** to minimise criticism of regimes. In a small, informal survey of 15 National Democratic Institute field offices, conducted in 2024, 100% of respondents noted that gendered disinformation was utilised against individual women in recent elections.¹² 87% of respondents were able to link gendered disinformation campaigns to efforts or strategies that support democratic backsliding or the broader rollback of women's rights. Women on the frontlines of democratic movements are often some of the earliest targets of such narratives and women from historically marginalised communities face compounded threats:

- In **Myanmar**, CNN and the Centre for Information Resilience (CIR) “identified hundreds of sexual videos and images used in pro-military Telegram channels

7 Livingstone (5 March 2024), The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/23/2024-global-elections-tracker-voting-dates-us-india-indonesia-belarus-haiti-pakistan-full-list>; and Liu (5 March 2019). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2041905819838147>.

8 Jankowicz (11 December 2017) Coda Story, Available at: <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women/>; Nina Jankowicz et al, (January 2021) The Wilson Center, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>; di Meo & Wilfore (8 March 2021) Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/>; Global Engagement Center (2023).

9 Detector Media (28 September 2022) Available at: https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/203226/2022-09-28-prostitution-will-save-ukraine-from-the-default-investigating-russian-gender-disinformation-in-social-networks/

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 National Democratic Institute (2024), Unpublished Report.

abusing women, often for having pro-democracy views, and hundreds more using sexual terms to achieve the same goal.”¹³ In further analysis, CIR found that these gendered disinformation campaigns often had a component of offline violence: at least 50% of the gendered and sexualised disinformation posts identified also doxxed (released private information, such as address and phone number) the women concerned.¹⁴ For example, “pro-[regime] Telegram channels appear[ed] to be coordinating with the [regime], doxxing women who oppose[d it], proactively alerting the [regime], and celebrating news of the women’s arrests.”¹⁵

- In **Poland**, during the *Strajk Kobiet* (Women’s Strike) in response to a restrictive abortion ban put forward by the far-right Law and Justice governing party in 2020, women activists were targeted by pro-government and pro-Russia factions with false narratives comparing them to Nazis and criticising the organisers of the strike for using curse words, a standard to which male politicians are not held.¹⁶
- AI-generated nonconsensual intimate imagery (NCII, or deepfake pornography) can also be utilised in gendered disinformation campaigns; **Indian** investigative journalist Rana Ayyub, whose work is critical of the Modi regime, was depicted in a pornographic deepfake in 2018 in an attempt to silence her.¹⁷ The video, created and shared by accounts supportive of Prime Minister Modi, was the first high-profile use of AI-generated NCII against a politically active woman, a trend that has since exploded as technology used to create synthetic content – including the development of applications and websites dedicated to generating such content – has become more accessible to the general public.¹⁸
- In a 2023 report on gendered hate speech in **Afghanistan**, CIR found that politically active women were targeted with false and sexualised narratives after the Taliban takeover of the country.¹⁹ Women were alleged to support LGBTQ+ rights (a highly sensitive issue in Afghanistan), to have engaged in prostitution, or to have modelled in the United States. Further, abusers also created fake accounts impersonating politically active women to discredit them.²⁰

13 Munsri (7 February 2023) CNN, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/07/asia/myanmar-military-sexual-images-doxxing-telegram-as-equals-intl-cmd/index.html>

14 Centre for Information Resilience (25 January 2023) Available at: <https://www.myanmarwitness.org/reports/digital-battlegrounds>

15 Ibid.

16 Jankowicz (2021) Unpublished report for FCDO/Sayara International

17 Ayyub (21 November 2018) Huffington Post, Available at: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/deepfake-porn_uk_5bf2c126e4b0f32bd58ba316

18 Lakatos (December 2023), Graphika “A Revealing Picture.” <https://graphika.com/reports/a-revealing-picture>

19 Centre for Information Resilience (April 2023) Available at: <https://www.afghanwitness.org/reports/violence-behind-a-screen%3A-rising-online-abuse-silences-afghan-women-->

20 Ibid.

- A 2023 report by Glitch, a UK charity, noted that across nearly 1 million posts on five different social media platforms, women experienced more highly toxic posts than men, and black women experienced more highly toxic posts than their white counterparts, with some posts and narratives linked to disinformation.²¹

In addition, gendered disinformation impacts **political participation, freedom of expression, and citizens' involvement in the broader democratic process**. There is often significant overlap between gendered disinformation and overarching forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), which constitutes both online and offline harm. In addition to spreading false or misleading gendered narratives about a target, abusers also make physical threats of violence online, including doxxing, SWATting, and other credible image or text-based violent threats to encourage targets to self-censor, or worse, remove themselves from the public sphere entirely. As a result, gendered disinformation, which is often paired with other forms of TFGBV, can further inequality for women political and public figures, creating disadvantages based on a candidate's gender.

Gendered disinformation can also impact men's participation in politics and the broader public sphere. For example, in attempts to undermine their authority, men can be labelled as gay, transgender, or another gender-nonconforming identity that may or may not be accurate but is often perceived negatively due to harmful social norms. Gendered disinformation, in particular against the LGBTQIA+ community, has also been deployed to undermine democratic progress, in particular by the Russian Federation in Europe.²² Overall, gendered disinformation and TFGBV are both part of an anti-democratic toolkit deliberately deployed to eliminate dissent against anti-democratic regimes.

Finally, gendered disinformation **affects voters' access to reliable information and erodes confidence in elections**. Gender-based campaigns designed to discredit women election officials and chief election officers have been deployed in attempts to undermine the democratic process, including in Ethiopia²³ and the United States, across political lines.²⁴ A 2022 Princeton University report found that women election officials across 43 U.S. states were 3.4 times as likely to receive threats and harassment

21 Glitch, UK (2023) "The Digital Misogynoir Report: Ending the dehumanising of Black women on social media". Online at: https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Glitch-Misogynoir-Report_Final_18Jul_v5_Single-Pages.pdf

22 Cecilia Strand and Jakob Svensson (2021), "Disinformation campaigns about LGBTI+ people in the EU and foreign influence," European Parliament. Available at: <https://dspace.ceid.org.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1/1805/QA0921283ENN.en.pdf>

23 Ethiopian Women Lawyer's Association (2021), "Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) Preliminary Statement of VAWE Monitoring." Available at: <https://ewla-et.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Press-release-II.pdf>

24 Ruby Edlin and Lawrence Norden (2024), "Poll of Election Officials Shows High Turnover Amid Safety Threats and Political Interference," Brennan Center. Available at: <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/poll-election-officials-shows-high-turnover-amid-safety-threats-and>

than their male colleagues.²⁵ As one CIR interviewee noted, women targeted with gendered disinformation during election periods “struggled with posts about sexual abuse” and “people threatening their children.”²⁶ This served to disincentivize some women from seeking such positions in the future.

Thus, this playbook holds as a central concept that **gendered disinformation cannot be narrowly viewed as a “women’s issue” but instead understood and addressed within the fabric of broader democratic and national security activities** including in: government (policymaking, diplomacy, and election administration), election observation groups, political party apparatuses, civil society, advocacy organisations, media, and international and multilateral organisations.

This playbook provides a reference point for how gendered disinformation works, offers real-world case studies to illustrate key aspects of this problem, and outlines possible responses to gendered disinformation challenges in four areas – technical, organisational, informational, and societal – for democratic-minded governments and partners, including civil society, to utilise and consider.

The focus of this document is on solutions that governments can pursue in the short and medium-term, not regulatory solutions that require the approval of legislatures.²⁷ While such solutions fall outside the scope of this playbook, individual government regulation may be necessary to ensure social media and technology companies’ transparency and conduct oversight over privacy, data protection, and online harms, all of which would improve the gendered disinformation landscape.

²⁵ Joel Day et al (2022), “Threats and Harassment Against Local Officials Dataset,” Princeton University. Available online at:

<https://bridgingdivides.princeton.edu/sites/g/files/toruqf246/files/documents/Threats%20and%20Harassment%20Report.pdf>

²⁶ CIR conducted interviews with experts on disinformation and women affected by disinformation from 25-27 March, 2024. In order to protect their privacy, their names and other identifying characteristics have not been included here.

²⁷ The question of regulating disinformation – gendered or otherwise – is thorny and can give rise to anti-democratic tendencies. Jankowicz & Pierson (December 2020) The Wilson Center, Available at:

<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/freedom-and-fakes-comparative-exploration-counteracting-disinformation-and-protecting-free>

3. NARRATIVES

Gendered disinformation – like disinformation broadly – poses a unique threat to democratic countries. Understanding common narratives in gendered disinformation about politics and elections is important as it can reveal information about actors who spread it, their motivations, and challenges in responding to the narratives' spread and absorption. These narratives can reinforce harmful stereotypes, cause lasting political damage, and weaken democracy. Critically, a better understanding of gendered disinformation narratives can also show how those actors are frequently connected. However, narratives frequently evolve and are deeply contextual; they differ between geographic areas and cultures. Accordingly, our understanding of narratives should shift over time and adapt to political climates and circumstances.

Three key themes of gendered disinformation in the context of elections and political processes are nearly universal across information spaces:

- objectification of women (especially via sexualisation)
- sexism
- reinforcement of traditional gender roles based on social norms and stereotypes

While these themes overlap, they are distinct enough to be understood and interrogated independently. The narratives discussed below – fitness for office, the motherhood conundrum, sexualisation, transphobia, antifeminism, and bogeymen – are based on one or more of these three key themes.

Another widespread phenomenon is that attacks on politically active women are compounded with other identity-based abuse, such as racism, transphobia and anti-LGBTQI+ hate, and religious hatred.

One final consideration is how authoritarians amplify politically motivated gendered disinformation, including *within* democracies. Indeed, gendered disinformation is coordinated by pro-authoritarianism actors domestic and foreign alike.²⁸ Gender equality is fundamentally a driving force of democratic consolidation.²⁹ Free and fair

28 Di Meo (6 December 2019). Available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gendered-disinformation-fake-news-and-women-politics>; EU Disinfo Lab (20 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/gender-based-disinformation-advancing-our-understanding-and-response/>; Kunze et al. (May 2021). Available at: https://she-persisted.org/Authoritarianism_and_Gendered_Disinformation_May_2021.pdf; and U.S. Department of State (20 January 2022). Available at: <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>; and Ukrinform (2023). Available at: https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-other_news/3780723-russia-uses-a-strategy-of-gendered-disinformation-in-ukraine-to-silence-women-journalists-study.html.
29 Valerie Hudson et al (2009), "The Heart of the Matter: The Security of Women and the Security of States," *International Security*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Winter 2008/09), pp. 7–45. Available online at: https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/IS3303_pp007-045.pdf

elections, as a defining feature of democracy, are therefore a major target of gendered disinformation.

3.1. FITNESS FOR OFFICE

One of the most overt narratives in political gendered disinformation is the notion that women and individuals perceived as feminine, or otherwise not conforming to prescribed gender norms, are unfit for office. These narratives can stem from qualities or behaviours specific to an individual, or sexist axioms that people of certain gender identities are inherently unable to lead.³⁰ Disinformation that uses these narratives can take a variety of forms, yet share a common thread in that they make politically active women seem weak, overly emotional, unstable, incapable, or robotic. Examples include false or misleading stories that a politically active woman engaged in drug usage, deepfakes that appear to depict stupidity, or political hypocrisy.

Politically active men can also be targeted by gendered disinformation that depicts them as insufficiently masculine, as is detailed below. This can serve as a means of tarnishing a man's reputation among women or other gender non-conforming individuals, or of undermining a gendered cause such as LGBTQI+ rights.

Lastly, disinformation using this narrative can alternatively depict women as engaging in stereotypically male behaviour, which is then viewed negatively, given that running for office or seeking power or representation is seen as "unfeminine" or "unbefitting" of women in many societies. These double standards might show politically active women swearing, wearing masculine clothing, or acting aggressively and dominantly. Women and LGBTQI+ persons with intersectional identities – including those presumed to be LGBTQI+, those with disabilities, and members of marginalised racial, ethnic, and religious groups – may be particularly targeted by these narratives.

Examples:

- A Finnish far-right party's campaign video made in 2021 depicted then-Prime Minister Sanna Marin as unintelligent, out-of-touch, and emasculating through parody.³¹
- In 2022, former Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin was a victim of a conspiracy theory spread online that she had used cocaine while in office,

³⁰ Jankowicz et al. (2020). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>; and Sessa (26 January 2022). Available at: <https://il.boell.org/en/2022/01/26/what-gendered-disinformation>; Scott (1 April 2021). Available at: <https://counteringdisinformation.org/node/13/>.

³¹ Pettersson et al. (21 March 2022). Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12814>.

making her unfit to lead.³² Marin felt compelled to eventually take a drug test and reveal its results, which were negative.³³

- A 2023 study of gendered disinformation about Mexican investigative reporter Carmen Aristegui found that 43% of all abuse against her was meant to discredit her work and reputation.³⁴
- Patience Nyange, an activist in Kenya who once ran for gubernatorial office, was the victim of disinformation that claimed she lived out of the country and that she had withdrawn from the election during her campaign.³⁵
- Female public figures in Kenya are often victims of the rapidly growing “manosphere,” a transnational phenomenon with its roots in incel ideology that promotes conspiracy theories such as the “red pill” concept and argues that men are emasculated by modern society and growing gender equality.³⁶
- Female opponents of former Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte were frequently and falsely accused of having ties to Communist movements. Male opponents were feminised, accused of being queer, or accused of engaging in paedophilia.³⁷
- Former Filipina Senator Leila de Lima was detained in 2017 on false drug-related charges, attempting to paint her as unfit for public service.³⁸
- In 2022, online discourse questioned the competency of women in the military when an F-35 fighter jet crashed aboard an aircraft carrier. The pilot of the jet was a man.³⁹ Further, Russia has used propaganda to highlight gender inclusion and the advancement of women in American and European militaries as a reason for the West’s “feminization.”

3.2. THE MOTHERHOOD CONUNDRUM

Most cultures around the globe have a deeply rooted notion that a woman’s ideal role in society is as a mother. Politically active women are punished with this notion as a double-edged sword: women in office with children, for example, are considered distracted and neglectful of both maternal and professional duties, whereas those without children are viewed as strange or unfeminine. At its extremes, these

32 Mac Dougall (20 August 2022). Available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2022/08/20/analysis-have-finland-partygate-videos-helped-or-hurt-sanna-marin>.

33 Henley (4 November 2022). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/04/finnish-pm-sanna-marin-cleared-of-misconduct-over-partying-footage>.

34 Posetti et al. (9 November 2023). Available at: <https://www.icfj.org/news/carmen-aristegui-case-study>.

35 Kaigai (6 February 2024). Available at: <https://amwik.org/empowering-women-to-combat-misinformation-in-the-digital-age%ef%bf%bc/>.

36 Kimeu (2 October 2023). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/02/as-social-media-grows-kenya-so-does-disturbing-toxic-manosphere>.

37 Kunze et al. (May 2021). Available at: https://she-persisted.org/Authoritarianism_and_Gendered_Disinformation_May_2021.pdf.

38 Amnesty International (8 March 2024). Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa35/7793/2024/en/>.

39 France 24 (23 March 2023). Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230323-across-globe-women-battle-gendered-disinformation>.

narratives depict women who do not have children as promiscuous, as women in some worldviews can only either be maternal or sexually deprived. This is sometimes referred to as the Madonna-whore complex.⁴⁰ This notion is more common in highly conservative or authoritarian countries and communities.⁴¹ Alternatively, women without children are sometimes depicted as incomplete, or “as old maids.”

Examples:

- With the proliferation and increased accessibility of deepfake technology, in response to an increase of AI-generated NCII, some in the manosphere have begun a movement known as “dignifAI” that encourages internet users to use generative AI to “correct” women’s images to fit typically accepted gender roles. A common trend in this movement is to add babies and children to women’s images.⁴² This could easily include the doctoring of images of politically active women.
- Female politicians in Australia and New Zealand have been repeatedly and publicly questioned on their plans for having children.⁴³
- In addition to facing threats of sexual violence themselves, politically active women around the globe who are victims of gendered disinformation commonly field rape threats or other sexually violent threats against their children. In 2018, Priyanka Chaturvedi, an Indian Member of Parliament, received a rape threat against her ten-year-old daughter.⁴⁴ Manuela d’Ávila, who ran against former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, received a rape threat on a publicly posted photo of her and her five-year-old daughter.⁴⁵

3.3. SEXUALISATION

Sexualisation is arguably the most common narrative in political gendered disinformation, just as it is in broader online violence against women. Sexualisation of women serves to objectify them – making them seem inherently less worthy than men – as well as shame, degrade, or humiliate them. Sexualisation can also feed into other narratives, including the concept that women are too “weak” or “incompetent”

40 Sessa (26 January 2022). Available at: <https://il.boell.org/en/2022/01/26/what-gendered-disinformation>; and Taylor et al. (22 August 2022). Available at:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/65c9ceb1a6a5b72d6f280d67/t/65cc2275de3f6e051af58601/1707876983168/Dangerous-speech-misogyny-and-democracy.pdf>.

41 Pettersson et al. (21 March 2022). Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/pops.12814>.

42 Hesse (27 February 2024). Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/power/2024/02/27/ai-gender-culture-war-content/>.

43 Williams (2020), “It’s a man’s world at the top: gendered media representations of Julia Gillard and Helen Clark,” *Feminist Media Studies* (Volume 22, 2022, Issue 4, pg 780-799). Available online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14680777.2020.1842482>; Eggert (2 August 2017). Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-40798966>.

44 Di Meco (17 February 2023). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/17/gender-trolling-women-rights-money-digital-platforms-social-media-hate-politics>.

45 Ibid.

to serve. This form of gendered disinformation may take the form of salacious rumours about a female politician, false or misleading images depicting sexual acts (e.g. deepfake NCII), or doctored content that shows female politicians dressed inappropriately. Deepfake NCII is an abundant source of harm, as the overwhelming majority of victims are women.⁴⁶ Women of colour disproportionately field sexualised threats and disinformation, as well.⁴⁷ Much of this form of gendered disinformation is accompanied by threats of rape and sexual abuse.⁴⁸

Examples:

- The messaging app Telegram is a bastion of both political discourse and disinformation, as well as a safe harbour for deepfake NCII.⁴⁹ This poses a massive threat to women around the world, as Telegram is highly popular in a number of democracies including Brazil, India, Mexico, Indonesia, Turkey, and the Philippines.⁵⁰ A 2022 BBC news investigation details the impact on targets of Telegram deepfake NCII, with some women being forced to leave their homes and homelands.⁵¹
- German politician Annalena Baerbock was the target of a doctored photo that falsely claimed to show she had previously been a sex worker.⁵² Notoriously, much of the disinformation and conspiracy theories that attacked Baerbock were both domestic and foreign in origin.⁵³
- Australian Member of Parliament Georgie Purcell has repeatedly been the victim of fake images that non-consensual sexualised image sharing, the most recent of which was done using an AI feature in Photoshop.⁵⁴

46 Shukla (29 February 2024). Available at: <https://www.techpolicy.press/deepfakes-and-elections-the-risk-to-womens-political-participation/>.

47 France (7 February 2024). Available at: <https://thegrio.com/2024/02/07/why-black-women-should-be-worried-about-ai-revenge-porn/>; Paris (13 December 2021). Available at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20563051211062919#bibr19-20563051211062919>; U.S. Department of State (27 March 2023). Available at: <https://www.state.gov/gendered-disinformation-tactics-themes-and-trends-by-foreign-malign-actors/>; Jankowicz et al. (2020). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>.

48 Di Meo (17 February 2023). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/feb/17/gender-trolling-women-rights-money-digital-platforms-social-media-hate-politics>.

49 Paris (13 December 2021). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20563051211062919#bibr19-20563051211062919>.

50 Statista (13 March 2024). Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1336855/telegram-downloads-by-country/>.

51 BBC (15 February 2022), "Telegram: Where women's nudes are shared without consent." Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60303769>

52 Sessa (26 January 2022). Available at: <https://il.boell.org/en/2022/01/26/what-gendered-disinformation>; and Wilfore (29 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-gendered-disinformation-playbook-in-germany-is-a-warning-for-europe/>.

53 Wilfore (29 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-gendered-disinformation-playbook-in-germany-is-a-warning-for-europe/>.

54 Taylor (2 February 2024). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2024/feb/03/georgie-purcell-nine-news-ai-photoshop-scandal>.

- The aforementioned study of online attacks on Mexican investigative journalist Carmen Aristegui showed that 14% of these attacks were sexual in nature.⁵⁵ Many of these attacks also deal in disinformation and conspiracy theories.⁵⁶

3.4. TRANSPHOBIA

Many women and gender-nonconforming public figures fall victim to disinformation rooted in transphobia. One common form of this is accusing an individual of being transgender when they are not. Other examples include falsely tying an individual to supposedly trans-coded behaviour, such as dressing in the “wrong” clothing or taking an interest in queer culture. Such claims typically rely on either doctored visual content or images that may be unedited, but purport to show something they do not. These claims obsess over an individual’s appearance, facial or body features, and how they do or do not conform to beauty standards, which are deeply subjective and variable.

Transphobic disinformation ultimately seeks to negatively and falsely portray public figures as transgender, purporting that conforming with one’s gender assigned at birth is the moral and natural obligation of a person. They suggest that women could not have gained positions of power without secretly having been men in the past. Most perniciously, it furthers the notion that transgender people are somehow inferior to cis-gender people. As of late, these narratives have been tied to conspiracy theories around other phenomena that *are* morally reprehensible – such as paedophilia and child abuse.

Examples:

- Former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was accused of being transgender when internet users pointed to a pleat in her skirt in an image as proof of cis-male genitalia.⁵⁷
- Russian disinformation frequently argues that Western collapse is imminent in part due to its adoption of LGBTQI+ rights.⁵⁸ Putin himself has expressed transphobia and disdain for so-called “gender freedoms” as part of his conspiracy theory that the West is trying to destroy Russia.⁵⁹ These notions are

55 Posetti (9 November 2023). Available at: <https://www.icfj.org/news/carmen-aristegui-case-study>.

56 Ibid.

57 Wilson Centre (January 2021). Available at:

https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/Report%20Malign%20Creativity%20How%20Gender%2C%20Sex%2C%20and%20Lies%20are%20Weaponized%20Against%20Women%20Online_0.pdf.

58 U.S. Department of State (20 January 2022). Available at: <https://www.state.gov/russias-top-five-persistent-disinformation-narratives/>.

59 Sauer (25 March 2022). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/25/putin-says-west-treating-russian-culture-like-cancelled-jk-rowling#:~:text=%E2%80%9CRecently%20they%20cancelled%20the%20children's,gender%20freedoms%2C%E2%80%9D%20Putin%20said.>

often fed into the information spaces of democracies and used to attack political figures that support equality, especially female and queer politicians.⁶⁰

- In the 2022 Brazilian elections, widespread disinformation claimed that now-President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva sought to let “men” (transgender women) use public restrooms next to girls.⁶¹ This references legal actions that allow or bar transgender individuals from using restrooms that align with their gender identity.
- French First Lady Brigitte Macron has also falsely been accused of being born a man in widespread disinformation.⁶²

3.5. ANTIFEMINISM

Antifeminist narratives claim that feminism – the idea that all people, regardless of sex or gender, are inherently deserving of equal rights, opportunities, and protections under the law – is fundamentally harmful. They target either vocal supporters of feminism or individuals seen as agents of feminism, regardless of whether they espouse feminist views. This means that female politicians and government figures are often lambasted merely for seeking a place in politics.

Specific sub-narratives include arguments that women in politics, national security, or other realms of government will weaken the nation. They sometimes claim that feminism or “wokeness” is eroding the nation and its institutions. Some sub-narratives extend beyond politics and claim that feminism is emasculating men and threatening the concept of a “traditional” family. These narratives rely on a blend of disinformation, conspiracy theories, and extremist values predicated on fear to make their claims.

Examples:

- Russian disinformation that targets Ukrainian journalists often makes links between feminism, Ukrainian nationalism, and terrorism.⁶³ This is especially pronounced in Russia’s war in Ukraine.
- The rise of social media platforms like Weibo in China in the late 2000s and early 2010s led to a wave of feminist discourse online. Many discussions centred on countering sexual violence, often through women seeking increased political power. The Chinese government eventually soured on this topic,

60 Gabbatt (26 February 2022). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2022/feb/25/tucker-carlson-fox-news-russia-putin>.

61 Jeantet (25 October 2022). Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/jair-bolsonaro-caribbean-social-media-brazil-b75e51f515b0a708800198afa1b8601d>.

62 Ibid.

63 Ukrinform (2023). Available at: https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-other_news/3780723-russia-uses-a-strategy-of-gendered-disinformation-in-ukraine-to-silence-women-journalists-study.html.

however, and Chinese feminist online activists became the victims of censorship and pro-state, antifeminist disinformation.⁶⁴

- One activist, Sophia Huang Xueqin, credited with bringing the #MeToo movement to China was disappeared by the state in 2021 and subsequently victimised by a pro-state disinformation campaign.⁶⁵ Per Amnesty International, she was facing false charges of subverting state power in late 2023.⁶⁶
- Men's rights groups in India that claim that focus on "women's rights" leads to discrimination against men, often without evidence, have made demands of politicians in the past.⁶⁷
- The U.K.-based Justice for Men and Boys is a political party that denigrates feminism through false or exaggerated narratives.⁶⁸ They frequently compare feminism and women's rights to Nazism.

3.6. ALIGNMENT WITH CONSPIRACIES

Drawing from notions that seek to disqualify female politicians and preach antifeminism, a final theme in gendered disinformation often portrays women as collaborators of a pernicious, often secretive political force.

Examples include falsely claiming that an individual is part of the "deep state" (a term used around the world, including in Israel⁶⁹ and several countries in the broader Middle East⁷⁰) a globalist movement, a historically subversive political party, or the governments of geopolitical rivals. The various organisations and entities in question may be real or imagined. This narrative has grown popular in the context of elections when political entities seek to discredit female politicians and their allies by any means necessary.⁷¹ It has severe implications for national security and democratic

64 Wang and Yuan (30 October 2023). Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/20594364231211421>.

65 BBC (18 May 2022). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/mediacentre/2022/bbc-eye-chinas-silenced-feminist>.

66 Amnesty International (21 September 2023). Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/09/china-metoo-and-labour-activists-facing-baseless-trial-must-be-released/>.

67 Gwalani (4 April 2014). Available at: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/mens-rights-activists-put-condition-for-their-vote/articleshow/33194416.cms>.

68 Marsh (2 May 2019). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/may/02/university-of-cambridge-criticised-for-hosting-anti-feminist-group-justice-for-men-and-boys>.

69 Weitz (5 April 2020), "Netanyahu: 'Deep State' Controls Israel, There's No Democracy Here." Available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2020-04-05/ty-article/netanyahu-deep-state-israel-no-democracy-here-lieberman/0000017f-e06e-d804-ad7f-1fecd800000>

70 Roberts (16 July 2015), London Review of Books, "The Hijackers." Available at: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v37/n14/hugh-roberts/the-hijackers>

71 See, for instance, previously noted claims of Moldovan President Maia Sandu being backed by a Western cabal.

resilience, as the narrative attacks the institutions that uphold the state by claiming that those institutions have been infiltrated.⁷²

Examples:

- Russia has famously launched disinformation attacks against women involved with democratic transitions in the post-Soviet area. The women in question can be either local to that country or foreign, typically Western, in origin.
 - Russian-backed forces have targeted Georgian civil society leaders such as Tamar Kinsturashvili, who leads the Media Development Foundation, a Georgian disinformation watchdog, with narratives that she and her organisation are foreign cut outs and “grant eaters.”⁷³
 - Russian outlet *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* claimed that Maia Sandu, a pro-Western politician, was a “puppet of the US and [George] Soros” when she was elected President of Moldova.⁷⁴
- Iranian journalist Yeganeh Rezaian was the victim of a government-led disinformation campaign that alleged she married a CIA spy. Her husband was in fact an American reporter for the *Washington Post*, but the association and resulting harassment was enough to chase them both out of the country. Rezaian remained a victim of this campaign long after she departed from Iran.⁷⁵
- Taylor Swift has been the subject of conspiracy theories and disinformation that portray her as an agent of the “deep state” in the United States.⁷⁶ Swift’s political activities remain limited, though the subject of much criticism and scrutiny.
- Marianna Spring, the BBC’s top reporter on disinformation, frequently receives abuse and is victimised by disinformation. She has been accused of being “Zionist-controlled,” an antisemitic reference to a secret Jewish organisation trying to control political and economic activity around the world.⁷⁷

72 Jordans (9 December 2022), Associated Press, “German coup plot fueled by conspiracy claims, COVID measures.” <https://apnews.com/article/germany-government-26412c360540a994a289850a1a5f9048>

73 Kinsturashvili (2024). “After my family members and I received abusive phone calls yesterday, we learned this morning that strangers put up posters on the walls of our office entrance saying that we are “grant eaters” who use foreign money to prevail lies. We are not afraid of you and say again #NotoRussianlaw which is already in action.” Available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:7194246775006711808/>

74 Necșuțu (16 December 2020), Veridica, “FAKE NEWS: Maia Sandu, a puppet of Soros and the US at the helm of the Republic of Moldova.” Available at: <https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news/fake-news-maia-sandu-a-puppet-of-soros-and-the-us-at-the-helm-of-the-republic-of-moldova>

75 Jankowicz et al. (2020). Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>.

76 Blake (14 February 2024). Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/14/gop-swift-superbowl/>.

77 Spring (17 October 2021). Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-58924168>.

CONCLUSION

The six broad categories of narratives presented here – fitness for office, the motherhood conundrum, sexualisation, transphobia, antifeminism, and bogeymen – display some of the most common forms of gendered disinformation in politics. Especially with evolving technologies such as AI, it is expected that these narratives will also grow and evolve. Much of the context within these narratives relies on the objectification of women, sexism, and traditional gender roles. As the examples above show, specific attacks often span these categories at once.

It is also critical to note the blurred line between disinformation – false or misleading information intended to mislead the receiver – and subjective opinion. Entities that spread gendered disinformation that targets politically active women frequently make value-based claims that cannot be proved or disproved. Additionally, there is a blurred line between parody and disinformation. Gendered disinformation is often overtly false and can be intended as humorous parody, but the damage of such content remains the same; information consumers might view parody as real, and act accordingly.

One final consideration on narratives is that researching this topic itself proves difficult for the same issues at the heart of this topic: researchers of gendered disinformation, especially in political contexts, frequently become victims themselves and experience a chilling effect in their work. Multiple authors of works reviewed for this section claimed that they were told not to research this topic so as to avoid becoming a victim. This is especially true in countries such as Kenya and Lebanon, where women are expected to conform to specific gender roles.⁷⁸ This points to the compounded problem of both understanding and solving gendered disinformation in political contexts.

⁷⁸ Kimeu (2 October 2023). Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/oct/02/as-social-media-grows-kenya-so-does-disturbing-toxic-manosphere>; and Chebaro (2022). Available at: <https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2231/me-too-politics-report-en.pdf>.

4. TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

There are several commonalities across gendered disinformation campaigns, including their tools and techniques. For the purposes of this playbook, **tools** are defined as the technological affordances by which malign actors carry out their gendered disinformation campaigns. **Techniques** are the often-coordinated behaviours malign actors use in service of the campaigns. Many tools and techniques that are employed in the service of broader disinformation campaigns are also used in gendered disinformation, but are not described in detail here.

Finally, it is important to note that social media's affordances – such as targeted advertising and algorithmic amplification – allow gendered disinformation to spread faster and farther, as well as be targeted to those who are most likely to engage with and share such content.

4.1 TOOLS

4.1.1. ANONYMOUS OR PSEUDONYMOUS ACCOUNTS

The use of Anonymous or Pseudonymous Accounts is a common tool in the gendered disinformation space. It allows perpetrators to hide their identity when carrying out gendered disinformation campaigns, thereby escaping accountability. Not all gendered disinformation is spread only via anonymous accounts, however; many well-known influencers, politicians, media personalities, and others openly spread gendered disinformation.

4.1.2. GENERATIVE AI

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) describes algorithmic systems (such as ChatGPT) that can be used to create new content, including audio, code, images, text, simulations, and videos.⁷⁹ As Generative AI tools have become more accessible and democratised, individuals are able to more easily, quickly, and convincingly generate fake photographs and videos, as well as large amounts of text, to promote gendered disinformation. This includes extreme examples such as apps that “nudify” – which, with a single photograph of a target's face, can generate a photorealistic nude image of that person – and the creation of non-consensual deep-fake pornography.

These apps can also be used for other forms of gendered disinformation and the more general subjugation of women and removal of their consent, from altering a

⁷⁹ McKinsey & Company (2 April 2024) Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/mckinsey-explainers/what-is-generative-ai>

woman's appearance to change her race, adding conservative clothing, or even adding children to photographs to fit patriarchal and misogynistic societal norms.⁸⁰

Generative AI has been deployed in political contexts for years; a CNN report detailed allegations of how accounts supportive of Prime Minister Modi were like an “army of trolls” acting against female politicians who were seen as political opposition, resulting in some of the women being the target of non-consensual deep-fake pornography.⁸¹

4.1.3. MANIPULATED IMAGERY

Manipulated Imagery is the use of crudely or obviously edited misleading visual content to spread gendered disinformation. Sometimes referred to as “**cheap fakes**,” these images are not created using generative AI, but still mislead the public. For example, the creator of a manipulated image or cheap fake may superimpose a target's face into a situation that undermines or embarrasses the target or edit the colouring of an image to make a target look less attractive or older. Although it may be obvious to viewers that the image is manipulated, it is still intended to harm or undermine the target.

The Iranian regime has regularly used cheap fakes to target female journalists; for example, a BBC Persia journalist's face was photoshopped onto a pornographic image, which was later sent to her son with the intent to blackmail her.⁸² More recently, Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska was edited into an image to make it appear as if she was sunbathing topless in Israel.⁸³

4.1.4. SOCK PUPPETS AND FAKE ACCOUNTS

Actors seeking to spread gendered disinformation often use sock puppets (false or secret online identities) and fake accounts to do so. These fake accounts, which take on a persona that is not real or their own, can be used to give the guise of grassroots support to gendered disinformation campaigns or to confuse social media users by creating fake accounts posing as targets. These accounts will then share damaging information about the target or behave in a way that would reflect poorly on the target.

80 Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (13 February 2024) Available at:

<https://globalextrmism.org/post/racist-and-misogynistic-ai-spreading-from-4chan-to-mainstream-platforms/>

81 Mackintosh & Gupta, Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/22/india/india-women-politicians-trolling-amnesty-asequals-intl/index.html>

82 Irish News (23 March 2022) Available at:

<https://www.irishnews.com/magazine/entertainment/2022/03/23/news/bbc-files-urgent-appeal-to-un-over-iranian-abuse-of-female-journalists--2622666/>

83 Arab News (23 March 2023) Available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2273986/world>

The fake accounts may also be used in attempts to brigade, dogpile, or swarm a target (see paragraphs 3.3.5 and 3.3.6 below) by sending harassing or false messages containing or supporting gendered disinformation narratives to a target. Sock-puppets and fake accounts make it difficult for platforms to crack down on accounts that may be violating terms of service.

Gendered disinformation is also a tool of transnational repression. The Iranian regime has often used sock-puppet accounts to target Iranian female journalists who reside abroad and speak out against the regime. They will create high numbers of fake accounts posing as journalists – with some using cheap fakes – mainly attempting to humiliate the journalist. Others use more deceptive tactics which may fool audiences into believing the accounts belong to the journalist.⁸⁴

4.2 TECHNIQUES

4.2.1. COORDINATED MESSAGING

To spread disinformation, malign actors will often use coordinated messaging techniques, sharing talking points, footage, photos, or narratives either openly or privately among media outlets, social media influencers, politicians, and others in order to spread and legitimise gendered disinformation.

In the past, social media influencers have been hired to share gendered disinformation narratives and make the related campaigns appear to be more legitimate, as well as amplify the narratives to their audiences. In particular, foreign actors, have used influencers to garner an international audience which can be used to mainstream gendered disinformation. Audiences are more likely to buy into gendered disinformation promoted by influencers rather than traditional political and media actors.

Although verified reports demonstrating the use of influencers in gendered disinformation campaigns are limited, the use of influencers to spread disinformation has been widely documented. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, influencers were paid to cut up their expensive handbags from Western brands who had sanctioned Russia and also helped spread narratives about the 'bravery' of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine.

In the online ecosystem, influencers have also been key to spreading disinformation, and often furthering sexist tropes about women. This has spanned cases such as

84 Timberg & Romm (25 July 2019) The Washington Post, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/07/25/its-not-just-russians-anymore-iranians-others-turn-up-disinformation-efforts-ahead-vote/> and Dehghan (24 January 2013) The Guardian, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jan/24/iran-fake-blog-smear-campaign-journalist-bbc#:~:text=In%20fact%2C%20Chazanfar%20is%20the,genuine%20fans%20of%20her%20journalism.> and Malekian (5 November 2022) ABC News, Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iranian-regime-cracking-protests-streets-online/story?id=91678156>

Jordan Peterson and Ben Shapiro's claims about feminism undermining men's rights and traditional values for women, Joe Rogan's criticisms and negative portrayals of the #MeToo Movement, and the global rise of popularity of Andrew Tate.

4.2.2. SWATting

SWATting, or when someone calls in a false, violent threat such as a bomb threat to a target's home or place of employment, thus triggering the deployment of a tactical team such as a SWAT team, is a technique often deployed alongside gendered disinformation to intimidate or harass targets out of public life. In the leadup to the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election, multiple U.S. politicians and public officials have been SWATted as a result of their political activity, including Secretaries of State Jena Griswold in Colorado and Shenna Bellows in Maine, as well as Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene.

4.2.3. DOXXING

Doxxing, the intentional publication of personal information including a target or family's address and phone number, is a technique often deployed against targets of gendered disinformation. Like SWATting, this technique is meant to intimidate women and force them out of public life; it is often targeted at women with children or families who cohabitate with them, compounding the harm. In a 2023 report, CIR found that women who opposed the military regime in Myanmar were often victims of doxxing.⁸⁵

4.3.3. VIOLENT THREATS

Direct, active, and explicit violent threats are also directed at targets of gendered disinformation. In a 2016 survey, the Inter-Parliamentary Union found that 44% of women parliamentarians across five continents reported receiving death, rape, assault, or abduction threats towards them or their families.⁸⁶

4.3.4. HATE SPEECH

Hate Speech, "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity,

85 Centre for Information Resilience (25 January 2023) Available at: <https://www.myanmarwitness.org/reports/digital-battlegrounds>

86 Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) Available at: <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>

nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”,⁸⁷ is often utilised in conjunction with gendered disinformation. It often appears in the form of online racism, misogyny, or sexism, although it can also take more extreme forms using violent or degrading language.

Hate speech promotes stereotypes about women and often infiltrates the broader culture, often using the critique of an individual target to attribute negative views about women more generally. At a Feminist Summit in Turkey, President Erdogan used gendered hate speech, claiming that women were unequal to men.⁸⁸ His comments connected hate speech to cultural and religious values by stating that Islam dictates women as mothers and that Feminists are against motherhood – in turn, not only portraying women or feminists as threatening religious and cultural values but also furthering false narratives about Islam/Muslims.⁸⁹ Erdogan also cited biological differences between men and women as evidence that women were unable to work the same jobs as men, an idea that has notably been used to keep women out of politics.⁹⁰ When leaders like Erdogan use misogynistic and sexist hate speech, they are automatically platforming these perspectives for the public, in turn, risking the increased acceptance and reproduction of these views in wider society.

Russia has also weaponised hate speech and sexist/misogynistic attitudes in the context of its international disinformation and influence campaigns. A study exploring Russia’s targeting of female Ukrainian journalists showed that pro-Russian sources use sexist narratives to link feminism, sexual deviance, pro-Ukrainian views, and terrorism.⁹¹ The report also evidences individual journalists who were targeted by tropes, such as a headline implying that Ukrainian journalist Nataliia Moseichuk had gotten her career due to her relationships with men.⁹²

4.3.5. DOGPILING

Dogpiling, also known as pile on attacks or volumetric attacks, is the use of overwhelming, mass-scale, coordinated attacks to “bury” targets of gendered disinformation. Dogpiling tactics attempt to draw out and silence targets by piling onto their personal and/or professional online accounts with negative and

87 United Nations, “What is hate speech?” Available online at: <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>

88 O’Grady (24 November 2014) Foreign Policy, Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/24/erdogan-tells-feminist-summit-that-women-arent-equal-to-men/>

89 The Guardian (24 November 2014) Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/24/turkeys-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-women-not-equal-men>

90 Ibid.

91 Kuzmenko & Kompantseva (2023) Women in Media, Available at: <https://cje.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/WEB-ENG-Gendered-Disinformation.pdf>

92 Ibid.

threatening messages, or repetition of gendered disinformation narratives. These techniques increase the intimidation that targets experience.

A prominent case of dogpiling is that of Lebanese journalist, Ghada Oueiss⁹³ State-backed dogpiling techniques were used to attack Oueiss after her coverage of the Arab Spring, demonstrating how gendered disinformation is often used to undermine movements, reporting, and the occupations of individual targets. The results of these attacks were two-fold: (1) they emboldened the sexist prejudices “about women’s inherent untrustworthiness, lower intelligence and promiscuity,” and (2) they have led to the continued dogpiling of Ghada Oueiss on social media to this day.⁹⁴

Case Study: Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon)- Part I

In an interview with CIR, Oueiss described the importance of introducing interventions around the types of gendered disinformation and connected harassment she endured: **“They need to be punished for this, otherwise they will repeat [it] and with new ways of doing it. If the perpetrators know that they will get away with this, they will repeat it or other perpetrators will repeat it because they can. Why? Because they can. It’s very easy. The digital world is very easy to keep anonymity [in].”**

4.3.6. BRIGADING

Brigading is a coordinated effort to send similar false, threatening, harassing, or otherwise negative messages to a target or to a platform on which the target communicates or does business. This might manifest in a campaign to target a woman’s career or business online. This may include swarming an online business profile, such as a law office, or doctor’s practice, with negative reviews or messaging.

Chinese-American journalist Leta Hong Fincher’s book pages on Amazon and Goodreads were targeted with false negative reviews by individuals leaving abusive or false messages in the place of the review, and who had clearly never read either of Hong Fincher’s books.⁹⁵

Additionally, brigading can be used to get a target of gendered disinformation’s social media accounts shut down by organising a mass reporting campaign of the target’s profile. This large number of reports sends signals to platforms’ AI-driven moderation

93 Posetti et al. (14 February 2023) International Centre for Journalist, Available at: https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/Ghada_ICFJ_Case%20Study.pdf

94 Media Support (2023) Available at: https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/IMS-Online-gendered-disinformation_final.pdf

95 Jankowicz et al., pg 33.

tools that content or a profile is dangerous, and the target's account is subsequently locked, effectively silencing the target.

4.3.7. LAWFARE

In addition to the impugning of their personal and professional reputations, targets of gendered disinformation often find themselves named in frivolous, burdensome, or extraneous lawsuits, sometimes called lawfare. By naming gendered disinformation targets in these suits, which typically include false allegations that further the gendered disinformation campaigns that preceded them, perpetrators hope for the judicial system to support their claim, resulting in financial damage or even prison time for women. Additionally, the target's time, energy, and often monetary resources will be usurped by navigating the legal system. This encumbers and silences targets by default, removing the obstacle that activists, politicians, election officials, and others pose to authoritarian regimes' strategic goals.

The most well-known example of lawfare was the attempt by the Philippines' President Rodrigo Duterte's litigation against Maria Ressa, in which the former President and his government targeted Ressa and her outlet, Rappler, with over a dozen different criminal cases in order to undermine her critical reporting.⁹⁶

The use of lawfare is also an increasing concern across Latin America: "in countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua" there "is a constant climate of fear due to political persecution" which has "had a serious impact on the work of civil society, especially women's groups."⁹⁷ In Guatemala, a number of activists deemed as political rivals to the President and leadership had criminal cases weaponised against them.⁹⁸ The President of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, and his political supporters have also been accused of using lawfare against female activists fighting for human rights as a strategic weapon. According to Katia Rejon, "In the Nicaragua of President Daniel Ortega, the defenders of human rights have three fates: death, incarceration, or exile."⁹⁹

96 Maas (2 February 2023) International Journalists' Network, Available at: <https://ijnnet.org/en/story/4-down-3-go-cataloging-maria-ressa%E2%80%99s-legal-battles-early-2023>

97 Daron (8 March 2023) WOLA, Available at: <https://www.wola.org/analysis/regressive-wave-women-central-america/>

98 Verapaz et al. (4 July 2022) Prensa Comunitaria, Available at: <https://prensacomunitaria.org/2022/07/persecucion-politica-contra-mujeres-en-guatemala-cuatro-casos-de-criminalizacion/>

99 Rejon (29 November 2022) Volcanicas, Available at: <https://volcanicas.com/perseguidas-presas-o-exiliadas-las-defensoras-de-nicaragua/>

Case Study: Ghada Oueiss (Lebanon) Part 2

In December 2020, Lebanese journalist Ghada Oueiss filed a lawsuit in a court in Florida accusing Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and co-conspirators...of involvement in the hack-and-leak¹⁰⁰ operation that engendered a widespread harassment campaign against her. In an interview with CIR, she highlighted the importance of accountability, noting that despite her fears in pursuing legal action she knew it was the right thing to do. During the interview, she stated that **“Unless you put a certain price to pay [on it], everybody will kill everybody. That’s why there are rules. They shouldn’t be enjoying impunity.”**

While her case did not result in legal consequences, it was essential to **“Speak truth to power.”** Oueiss highlighted how the case garnered global attention - **“Many newspapers around the world from India to Latin America to Europe and to the United States, of course, and even the Arab world, started to talk about my lawsuit.”** Her actions show the importance of speaking up and raising awareness around the issue of gendered disinformation.

4.3.8. CYBERSTALKING

Cyberstalking is the “the use of digital technology to track and harass someone,”¹⁰¹ for example via social media, email, or other messages.¹⁰² Cyberstalking is often used in coordination with gendered disinformation and is carried out across multiple platforms with obsessive granularity.

In Argentina, Ofelia Fernandez, the youngest politician to be elected to Buenos Aires city legislature, was forced to shut down her Twitter account due to cyberstalking and other forms of online gendered disinformation.¹⁰³

4.3.9. MALIGN CREATIVITY

A subset of gendered disinformation is “malign creativity,” when perpetrators employ text or image-based memes to evade content moderation related to their

100 Shilad (11 February 2021) Committee to Protect Journalists, Available at: <https://cpj.org/2021/02/ghada-oueiss-hacking-harassment-jamal-khashoggi/>

101 eSafety Commissioner, “Cyberstalking.” Available at: <https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-topics/staying-safe/cyberstalking>

102 Merriam Webster, Available at: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/legal/cyberstalking>

103 Caeiro & Tchintian (2 November 2021) Chatham House, Available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2021-10/tackling-online-abuse-against-women-politicians>

disinformation campaigns or other forms of online gender-based violence.¹⁰⁴ It involves using fast-evolving memes and dog whistles that appear banal, mundane, or unrelated to the untrained eye, or, crucially, to the artificial intelligence systems that are scanning content on social media platforms.

For instance, users may use special characters or spacing to allude to a gendered disinformation or hate speech slur (e.g. “b!tch” for bitch, or “juice” for “Jews”), or alternatively include the potentially violative content in an image, which platforms scan less frequently. Online misogynists may send empty egg cartons to women, suggesting they are infertile,¹⁰⁵ or may use photomanipulation or infographics to spread false information, often of a gendered or sexualised nature, that goes undetected. These tactics are a key force in gendered disinformation going unnoticed, unmoderated, or remaining pervasive in digital spaces.

4.3.10. HACK AND LEAK OPERATIONS

Another technique used to undermine women in public life is hack and leak operations, in which perpetrators “use cyber tools to gain access to sensitive or secret material and then release it in the public domain.”¹⁰⁶ While often used in the national security space, hack and leak operations can also be used against women to create “the ‘simulation of scandal’: strategic attempts to direct public moral judgement against the operation’s target.”¹⁰⁷ Women’s private communications, including nude/intimate imagery or private texts with romantic partners, may be released to undermine their credibility. In some cases, forgeries can be inserted among legitimate hacked documents to undermine the target.

Many female journalists, activists, public figures, and journalists have been targeted by hack and leak operations using spyware tools. Saudi Arabian activist and professional equestrian Alya Alhwaiti, was a victim of these tactics and believes that she was “targeted in a hack-and-leak attack using NSO Group’s Pegasus spyware.”¹⁰⁸ The use of these tactics directly impacted her own feelings of security and safety.

¹⁰⁴ Jankowicz et al, (January 2021) The Wilson Center, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online>

¹⁰⁵ Spratt (6 March 2020), “Why Are Members Of The Alt-Right Sending Me Pictures Of Empty Egg Boxes?” Available at: <https://www.refinery29.com/en-gb/2020/03/9512337/anti-feminism-alt-right-fertility>

¹⁰⁶ Shires (14 April 2020) War on the Rocks, Available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-simulation-of-scandal/>

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Solon (1 August 2021) “I will not be silenced!: Women targeted in hack-and-leak attacks speak out about spyware” Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/i-will-not-be-silenced-women-targeted-hack-leak-attacks-n1275540>

5. CHALLENGES

There are, unfortunately, many challenges to implementing programmes that identify and mitigate gendered disinformation. This year, as Trust and Safety teams at social media platforms are hollowed out,¹⁰⁹ and addressing disinformation more broadly has become politicised, these obstacles have become more numerous and thornier.

This section describes the challenges in four categories:

- Lack of technical capacity or capability
- Inadequate organisational resourcing or infrastructure
- Information ecosystem (media coverage, awareness, access to information) challenges
- Societal challenges

5.1. LACK OF TECHNICAL CAPACITY AND/OR CAPABILITY

Candidates for public office and government officials sometimes **lack basic cyber hygiene, IT security, and physical security practices**, particularly if new to politics or from an under-resourced region. Doxxing, hack-and-leak operations, and other cyber-exploits are fuelled by poor cyber hygiene, IT security, or awareness of the importance of these practices. Additionally, few new candidates and officials have proactive plans in place to protect their physical security, including the proactive removal of personal information such as address and phone number from the internet. Finally, candidates and officials operating with small teams and without the support of large party or government apparatuses may not prioritise setting a proactive physical threat posture for their organisation, incorporating practices such as varying routines, travel check-ins, etc.

Social media platforms have recently closed or monetised their Application Programming Interfaces (APIs),¹¹⁰ which has rendered the proactive tracking of gendered disinformation campaigns and early/rapid response difficult, if not impossible, outside of well-appointed for-profit or government media monitoring and communications teams. Privately licensed tools to conduct social listening exist but are prohibitively expensive for most non-profits, local government institutions, and small media organisations.

109 Motyl (4 January 2024), Tech Policy Press, “The Unbearably High Cost of Cutting Trust & Safety Corners.” Available at: <https://www.techpolicy.press/the-unbearably-high-cost-of-cutting-trust-safety-corners/>

110 Newton (14 March 2024) Platformer, Available at: <https://www.platformer.news/meta-crowdtangle-shutdown-dsa-platform-transparency/> and Calma (31 May 2023) The Verge, Available at: <https://www.theverge.com/2023/5/31/23739084/twitter-elon-musk-api-policy-chilling-academic-research>

5.2. INADEQUATE ORGANISATIONAL RESOURCING OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Due in part to the dearth of available and affordable monitoring tools, **organisations are slow to recognise gendered disinformation threats**. A prevailing – but misleading – piece of wisdom has guided many organisational responses to gendered disinformation: “strategic silence,” wherein an organisation attempts not to give credence to or further amplify disinformation by simply staying quiet and not addressing it.¹¹¹ As University of Washington professor Kate Starbird wrote after becoming the target of a disinformation campaign that included gendered elements: “One lesson we’ve learned is around the limits of ‘strategic silence’ and the value of getting factual information out into the world, quickly, to correct falsehoods.”¹¹² In order to protect their employees’ safety, organisations need to improve their ability to respond – at speed and at scale – to gendered disinformation campaigns.

Organisations – from government departments to CSOs – often lack policies to support targets of gendered disinformation or broader online violence. This means that women feel unsure about expressing themselves online, should they be targeted with online harm; it may cost them their jobs, and they may need to face law enforcement and the legal system, seek psychological support, and attempt to correct the record on their own.

Candidates for office and some officials lack the funds or expertise to:

- **mobilise communications campaigns** that can respond to or drown out gendered disinformation;
- respond to frivolous lawsuits;
- keep themselves physically secure.

Broadly, **governments and law enforcement officers lack awareness of what gendered disinformation is**, and that in some contexts it may be adjacent to illegal activity. They do not understand how it connects to broader online harms and national security or what they can do to support targets in a trauma-informed way. When women report cyberstalking, doxxing, or credible violent threats that are adjacent to gendered disinformation campaigns, they often meet little support – and sometimes even outright resistance – from law enforcement officers and government officials. This disincentivises women from reporting such behaviours in the future.

Election administrators, officials, and election observers lack access to or budget to subscribe to social listening tools, and/or do not have the staff trained to use them. This means that in communications to the public, and through election observation missions, a robust analysis of gendered disinformation will be impossible, affecting the information the public has to make decisions at the ballot box.

¹¹¹ Donovan & Boyd (2021) American Behavioural Scientist, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219878229>

¹¹² Starbird (6 October 2023) The Seattle Times, Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/uw-misinformation-researchers-will-not-buckle-under-political-attacks/>

Allies – **government communicators, CSOs, international organisations and others** – are siloed, and do not have pre-existing, proactive channels through which to share information about and organise against gendered disinformation. If a gendered disinformation campaign begins to gain traction, there is no single channel through which a CSO – can ‘raise the alarm’ and call for mutual aid and communications support from like-minded allies. Further, allies that *do* organise against gendered disinformation may become targets themselves.

5.3. CHALLENGES IN THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Media outlets often fall victim to gendered stereotypes and framing when reporting on men and women seeking political office and in elected positions. A 2020 study found that “Overall, women politicians receive more attention to their appearance and personal life, more negative viability coverage, and, to some extent, stereotypical issue and trait coverage.”¹¹³ Women are broadly underrepresented in the media ecosystem; a 2024 Reuters Institute study found that only 24% of the 174 top editors across 240 brands are women, and only 40% of journalists in 12 global markets are women.¹¹⁴

The public, media outlets, and even some governments **do not understand the ‘online-offline continuum,’** that is, what happens online affects women offline. This means that threats such as gendered disinformation and the adjacent online violence that women experience are often discounted as “mean words,” without recognition that it changes women’s physical security, affects their economic prospects, changes the careers they pursue, and negatively impacts their mental health.

As a result, **voters lack unbiased information about women candidates and officials** upon which to base their decisions at the ballot box and beyond. This affects the amount of women in representative government and seeking appointed positions such as those in election administration, and the efficacy of democracy and democratic movements.

5.4. SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Misogyny and anti-feminist sentiments create challenges for women running for office and in public service and enable the environment for gendered disinformation.

Gendered disinformation and online violence are normalised. NDI writes in its renewed call to action to end violence against women in politics: “Until recently,

113 Van Der Pas & Aaldering (February 2020) Journal of Communication, Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/joc/article/70/1/114/5761879>

114 Arguedas et al (8 March 2024), Reuters Institute, “Women and leadership in the news media 2024: Evidence from 12 markets.” Available at: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2024-evidence-12-markets#:~:text=of%20mid%2DFebruary,-,Findings,12%20markets%20who%20are%20women>.

violence against women in politics was a largely invisible problem as women are frequently told that abuse, harassment and assault are simply 'the cost of doing politics.' As a result, violence was routinely normalised as part of a woman's political experience and women grew used to dismissing it. Those who recognise these acts to be unacceptable are often strongly discouraged from reporting them in addition to being threatened by colleagues and forced to remain silent."¹¹⁵

Men and boys are being radicalised to abusive behaviour and violence through algorithmic amplification of online extremist content that exploits vulnerabilities around romantic rejection, loneliness, and disenfranchisement. A 2024 survey of over 3,600 young adults in the UK found that "one in five (21%) men aged 16 to 29 who have heard of [misogynist and indicted rapist and sex trafficker] Andrew Tate say they have a favourable view of him."¹¹⁶ Men and boys with radicalised views are more likely to share and engage in gendered disinformation campaigns.

Powerful institutions are reticent to publicly address the problem of gendered disinformation because anti-democratic forces have made doing so costly. Issues surrounding feminism and gender equality can provoke backlash, vitriol, and threats to programming and partners. Additionally, since gendered disinformation is often employed in political situations, many governments feel it is impossible to wade into these seemingly treacherous waters. As a result, institutions including government departments and international organisations are sometimes reticent to issue public statements of support, guidance, or to enter the arena where gendered disinformation is concerned.

Election Specific Challenges: Kenyan Case Study

An interviewee from Kenya noted challenges around gendered disinformation in specific reference to heated political debates and election periods. She noted how both key leaders and parties in Kenya have used gendered disinformation for strategic goals, with statements including: **"A certain story sticks when it fits [the President's] agenda"** and that Kenya has **"instances of young women being bullied by their own party members and the party is not doing anything about it."** She also noted that gendered disinformation had been used during elections, specifically citing challenges around the 2022 Kenyan Election. She underlined that **"In 2022, a lot of fake accounts, especially for female politicians, popped up. So, people created these pseudo accounts and then they were using them to sort of insult and disregard the women."** In anticipation of the next Kenyan election, she noted that a key challenge will be to increase the accountability of the political leaders and parties.

¹¹⁵ National Democratic Institute (2020) Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NTC%202021%20ENGLISH%20FINAL.pdf>

¹¹⁶ Kings College London (1 February 2024) Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/masculinity-and-womens-equality-study-finds-emerging-gender-divide-in-young-peoples-attitudes>

6. RESPONSES

Based on the above review as well as interviews with key informants who have researched or been targeted by gendered disinformation, CIRs view the life cycle of interventions needed to identify and mitigate gendered disinformation in four phases:

- **Prepare** by hardening operational and IT security of target individuals, and increase governments' awareness of the challenge, and design and implement employee support policies.
- **Identify** by proactively monitoring the information space for gendered disinformation narratives, tools, and techniques. Create mechanisms to share data access, rapid response coordination and alerts.
- **Respond** to discrete gendered disinformation campaigns through coordinated strategic communications efforts. Empower and fund rapid response mechanisms and coordinated communications campaigns.
- **Disrupt** the cultural, political, and societal architecture that makes gendered disinformation possible. Create and lobby for media and political party codes of conduct, training and funding for trauma-informed law enforcement responses, awareness building campaigns, and programs to cultivate allyship.

6.1 PREPARE

- **Harden IT and Operational Security:** Donors should ensure women candidates for office, civil society leaders, and election commissioners are well equipped to handle online threats. In addition to training on these topics, specific interventions could include funding for security audits or access to anti-doxing services.
- **Build Awareness:** Engage gendered disinformation researchers and advocacy groups to run training on recognising and responding to gendered disinformation in election environments for governments, CSOs, media, political parties, and election officials. Place a special emphasis on gender mainstreaming and targeting men in these groups.
- **Employee Support Policies:** While newsrooms are beginning to recognise their journalists are targets of gendered disinformation and online violence, few non-profits, political parties, or government bodies such as election commissions have policies in place or the resources to support employees who are targets. **Donors should adopt a recommended support policy that organisations can take on board and implement according to their needs**

and resources. CIR recently adopted such a policy; it includes anti-doxxing subscriptions, support to physically move locations if doxxed, psychological support, and assistance with law enforcement if a team member wants to make a claim.¹¹⁷ The mere existence of policies like this telegraphs to employees, candidates, party members, etc., that their organisation will support them if they are targeted by gendered disinformation, enabling them to utilise their right to free expression to speak more fully. **Donor countries could fund abuse policy implementation,** making it possible for CSOs or cash-strapped local election bodies to ensure their teammates are protected while they engage in important work to preserve democracy.

6.2 IDENTIFY

- **Create a gendered disinformation observatory:** Throughout consultations conducted by the National Democratic Institute, participants repeatedly identified the need to pool resources for the identification of and response to gendered disinformation campaigns. When pop star Taylor Swift was targeted with deepfake NCII that trended on X (formerly Twitter), her fans identified the problem and quickly swarmed the #TaylorSwift hashtag to bury the offensive content. Participants identified this model as one that could be replicated among groups concerned about gendered disinformation, particularly during high-stakes events like elections. This gendered disinformation observatory could address:
 - **Data Access:** Until regulatory mechanisms secure data access for researchers, CSOs, election observation missions, and others, the observatory could facilitate these groups sharing subsidised access to social listening tools.
 - **Rapid-response/alert sharing:** The observatory could share information about exigent threats against candidates or other high-profile women, as well as trending narratives related to gendered disinformation amongst each other, and, where appropriate, with governments and international organisations.
 - **Reporting Mechanisms:** Through the observatory, the Global Partnership and affiliated structures could fund campaigns to publish rapid reports about gendered disinformation, especially for election administrations to report to the public about the campaigns during ongoing electoral contexts.

¹¹⁷ Centre for Information Resilience (October 2023) Available at: https://www.info-res.org/_files/ugd/186c16_d8c0cd894cd54b729b5a1f4fce49604d.pdf

6.3 RESPOND (SHORT-TERM)

- **Rapid Response Fund:** Women targeted by gendered disinformation often find themselves violently threatened, implicated in lawsuits, and in need of rapid public relations support. They often do not have the resources, both monetary and human, to support a muscular response to the campaigns that target them. Donors could support a nimble, big tent rapid response fund to aid women across sectors and borders to mount a professional and coordinated response to these campaigns. It is crucial that this fund is not exclusionary and welcomes applications from groups, bodies, and individual women around the world, and that it has the capacity to quickly deliver the support it promises without undue burden for the targets it seeks to support.
- **Coordinated Communications Campaigns via Gendered Disinformation Observatory:** After the gendered disinformation observatory identifies campaigns, it can organise coordinated responses depending on the circumstances and in coordination with the affected parties. Observatory members can elect to engage in coordinated posting across social media/social media flash mobs to raise awareness about a particular incident, sign open letters, author op-eds in support of targets, work to identify members of the press to cover such campaigns, to name a few potential interventions. Ideally, the observatory would employ a CSO with broad-based international strategic communications experience to act as a *pro bono* crisis communications consultancy for the group.

6.4 DISRUPT (LONG-TERM)

- **Create and Lobby for Adoption of Codes of Conduct for Media and Political Parties:** Throughout NDI consultations, participants underlined the gender stereotypes that perpetuate and amplify gendered disinformation in the media and within political parties. Donors, including Global Partnership countries, and the broader research and advocacy community, could draft suggested codes recommending standards for covering women candidates and leaders, and work with local organisations including media associations and international political party secretariats to ensure adoption. Local organisations might also advocate for the censure of candidates and media organisations that do not comply with these codes, once adopted. A CIR interview participant from the African continent advocated such a policy: “If [politicians] are seen to be harassing anyone as a party member, as a political leader,” she said, “they should be able to lose their seats because of that.”
- **Training and funding for trauma-informed law enforcement responses:** Gendered disinformation itself is not criminalised, but in some countries, some of the adjacent tactics – like cyberstalking, credible violent threats, and

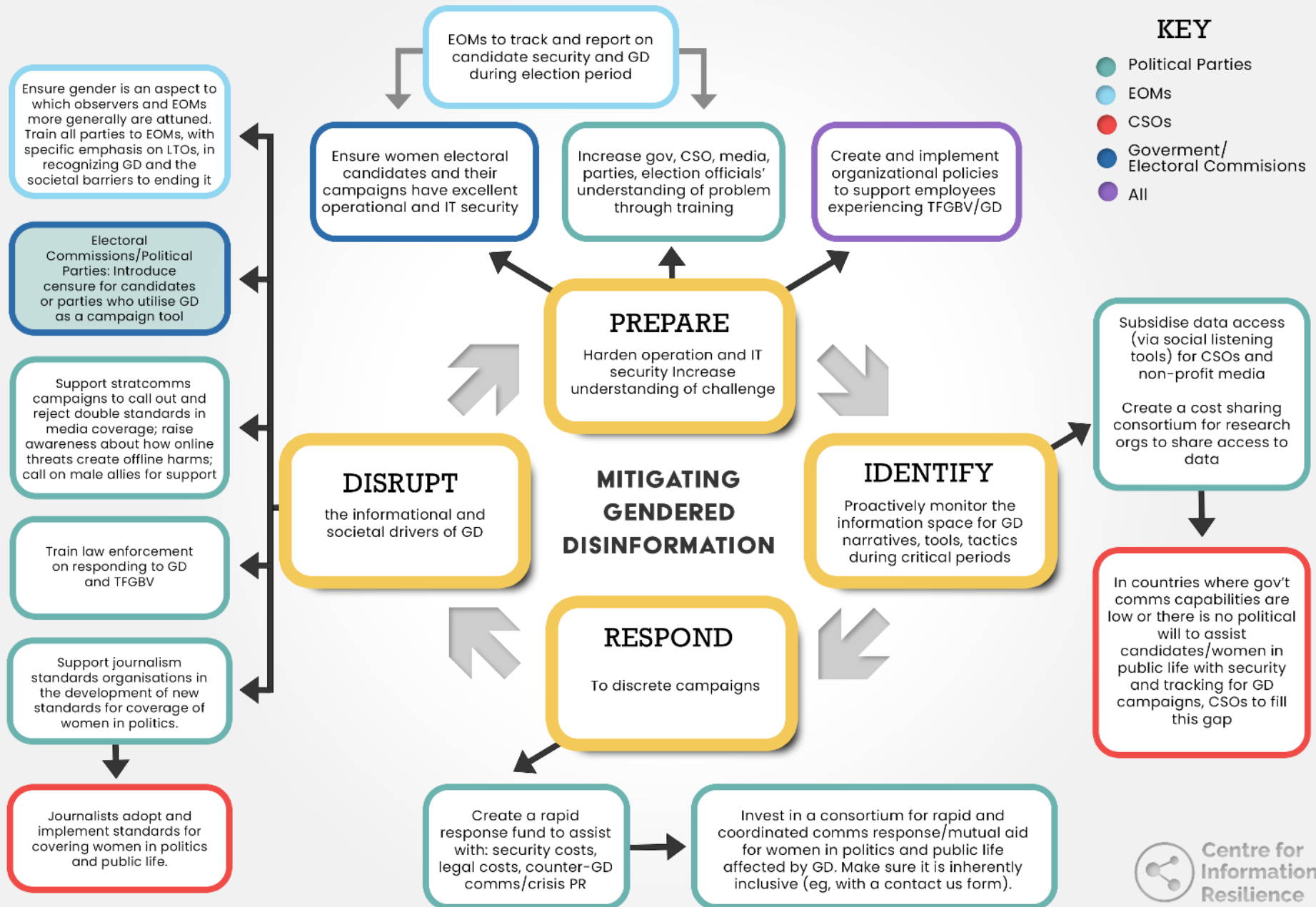
nonconsensual intimate image abuse – are. Law enforcement bodies are roundly criticised among survivors of online harms for downplaying these threats. They need training on trauma-informed responses to online harms. In some cases, NDI consultation participants noted that law enforcement needs to be incentivised to pursue assignments dealing with online threats, which are less lucrative than other parts of the law enforcement sphere. Donors should consider funding CSOs in the online safety and gendered disinformation spaces to run training for law enforcement and encourage the creation and implementation of policy frameworks that result in more care and attention to these issues across law enforcement bodies.

- **Awareness Building Campaigns:** Informed by localised polling to understand what narratives affect change in each country or region, the Global Partnership and other donors should consider investing in communications campaigns to build awareness of narratives, tools, techniques, and goals of gendered disinformation, especially in contexts of democratic backsliding or elections. Groups might also consider developing AI-assisted messaging campaigns to identify and push back against gendered disinformation narratives as they develop.
- **Cultivate Allyship:** Donors must invest in training, workshops, and campaigns for men and boys to address the root causes of misogyny and incel culture. Particularly as boys are introduced to the internet, online safety education in schools should include evidence-based interventions and lessons on how to be active 'online bystanders.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ GLITCH (September 2021) Available at: https://glitchcharity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Glitch_Online_Active_Bystander_ALMAL_Sept2021.pdf

KEY

- Political Parties
- EOMs
- CSOs
- Government/ Electoral Commissions
- All



7. CONCLUSION

Gendered disinformation is a critical problem exacerbated by digital technologies. It hastens democratic backsliding, empowers authoritarians, and undermines free and fair elections. It is also a national security issue, allowing adversaries of democracy undue influence over political discourse and electoral processes when left unchecked.

However, CIR's literature review and conversations with key informants in this space show that there is room for governments, civil society organisations, election monitors, and media to work together to begin to address this challenge. In the absence of regulation, donors should focus on breaking down siloes between feminist, tech, and research groups worldwide to provide more access to data, funding, and a collective communications response to the problem.

Even with greater attention being paid to gendered disinformation and online violence in recent years, given the lack of regulation on technology firms, targets of gendered disinformation feel left behind. One interviewee told CIR: **"I don't think anyone is doing enough...[not the] governments who pretend to be democratic and be defending humans,"** she specified, particularly noting that **Western governments were not meeting her expectations. "They're not doing enough. Tech companies are so powerful, so eager for money. We [are] still at the beginning of this battle. It's a long road."**

In a year when democracy hangs in the balance, it is critical for the international community to join together to begin the journey down the long road to address gendered disinformation; this playbook can provide a preliminary map.