



*Intersectional
Feminist Media
Development*

Learning Brief No. 2

Online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech

Current digital infrastructures present threats to gender equality, democracy, peace and the positive impacts – in media and societies around the world – accomplished in the past 30 years. Issues like online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech are growing at an alarming rate, and the consequences are colossal.

This learning brief focuses on the issues of online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech against women, girls and non-binary people who work or appear in the media and what media development organisations can do to address them.

What are digital gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech?

Online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech are distinct parts of online gender-based violence and can take many forms. The Association for Progressive Communication defines online gender-based violence as: “acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as phones, the internet, social media platforms and email ¹.” For more information on online gender-based violence, see IMS’ Intersectional Feminist Learning Brief no. 1.

Hate speech is 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, i.e., their religion, ethnicity, gender or other identity factor. ² Sexist hate speech relates to expressions which spread, incite, promote or justify hatred based specifically on a person’s sex or gender. A simple example: calling a woman source in media an “idiot who is terrible at her job” would be defined as abuse, but would not fall under the category gendered hate speech, whereas calling her a “slut that should get back into the kitchen” would. For something to be hate speech, the perpetrator does not need to have a wish to deceive others, and it can be a one-off incident. It does, however, always aim to degrade the target.

Gendered disinformation uses false or misleading gender or sex-based narratives, mainly against women, girls and non-binary

people, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring them from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent and coordination. ³ This means that disinformation is spread deliberately with the intention of deceiving and influencing its receivers, and it is not necessarily (openly) hostile, but always misleads readers. The technological infrastructure available today makes it easy for groups of like-minded individuals to organise attacks and campaigns as well as fuelling false narratives on large scales.

An example of online gendered disinformation is the case of Al Jazeera anchor Ghada Oueiss. In mid-2020, she had private photos of herself in a swimsuit stolen from her phone and shared online accompanied by lies that the photos were taken at the Al Jazeera chairman’s house and that the photos were evidence of Oueiss’ corruption, greediness and indecency.

The attackers' coordinated efforts fed into thousands of people's prejudices about women's inherent untrustworthiness, lower intelligence and promiscuity. Ghada Oueiss was bombarded with hatred, and the false narratives continue circling social media to this day.

The use of sexist, homophobic or transphobic slurs is by no means incidental. We know from the physical world that the risks of violence that men and women face are largely not the same and require different responses.

A study showed that women on Twitter

were on the receiving end of 94.2 percent of the cases when it comes to gendered abuse specifically.⁴ Perpetrators of gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech often follow the same script: intimidating, shaming and discrediting their targets.⁵ It is a strategic weapon to promote political, social and economic goals, and it is a well-known form of propaganda. Gendered slurs are used because they are effective: they activate and aggravate our entrenched beliefs and fears about who is and is not worthy of trust, power and the spotlight.

Examples of ways online gender-based violence can manifest⁶

- **hacking**
- **surveillance** by partners, workplaces, states or other actors
- **doxing**: sharing private information about a target, for example their address or non-consensual sharing of intimate photos
- **deep fakes**: using artificial intelligence to manufacture images, audio and videos to look real
- **astroturfing**: disseminating content that appears to happen organically but is actually coordinated by a person, organisation, political party or the like
- **dog whistling**: using words and/or symbols with a double or coded meaning that is abusive

It is sometimes argued that sexist and other hate speech is justified under the right to freedom of expression. Freedom of opinion and expression are, indeed, cornerstones of human rights and pillars of free and democratic societies. Hate speech, on the other hand, is not part of international human rights framework, and “incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence” is

prohibited under criminal law. The relation between the two is addressed in the UN Rabat Plan of Action, suggesting a high threshold for restrictions on freedom of expression based on the social and political context, status of the speaker, intent to incite the audience against a target group, content and form of the speech, extent of its dissemination and likelihood of harm.

How do gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech manifest online?

Online gendered attacks might appear in well-known formats, such as articles, tweets or videos, while others take more subtle forms, such as memes, dog whistles and viral in-jokes that only people of certain communities can decode (for example, Pepe the Frog, which became a meme and

a hate symbol in “alt-right” communities, but to outsiders would look like a harmless cartoon) or that algorithms will not detect (for example, spelling “bitch” as “bltch”). Often perpetrators use new and creative techniques to get their message out while avoiding being caught by algorithms and moderators.

Attacks might come as enormous online hurricanes that flood the conversation while harming and side-lining a journalist, but it can also come as drops of hate and a sense of a lack of safety, building over years and years. They can appear in comment sections, on social media or through group messages late at night. They can come from anyone, from media colleagues and family members to anonymous audiences to politicians to presidents. A growing trend is well-coordinated attacks by states, state-aligned groups and groups with political interests that weaponise armies of professional trolls, bots and online networks. Online disinformation and hate speech have become fixed tools in the authoritarian toolbox to control power, and high-level political leaders and state actors are identified as some of the biggest instigators. Forty-one percent of women journalists have been targeted in attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns.⁷

The likelihood of attacks increases through a set of intersecting factors. One is gender identity: women, girls, transgender and non-binary people are at a higher risk of gender-based attacks. Another is the level of public participation; the more active women, girls and non-binary people are in public

debate, the greater the risk. For this reason, journalists, politicians and activists often end up at the frontlines of abuse. Other factors that come into play are religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities, age, class, language and others. Black, Indigenous, Jewish, Arab and lesbian women journalists experience the highest rates and most severe impacts of online violence.⁸ Finally, for journalists, opinion writers, sources and those express themselves in media, it also matters which topics they cover: gender and women's rights, sexual violence, abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, politics and extremism are examples of high-triggering areas.

It is important to stress that gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech not only derive from the outside, but media can lead, perpetrate and exacerbate these issues, both externally and internally, for example through their treatment and coverage of topics; their terminology and biases; their choice of sources; the discourse they carry and allow about different groups in society; their support (or lack thereof) for targeted employees; their conduct towards colleagues; and more.

Case: Radio Rozana

Radio Rozana is a Syrian exile media outlet and long-term IMS partner. Radio Rozana's Chief Editor Loujeina Haj Yousef says:

“Every time Radio Rozana publishes anything related to gender issues or women's rights, we are attacked online. When we publish content on issues such as marital rape, cheaper alternatives to sanitary pads or women driving cars, we are accused of being indecent and of disrespecting Syrian culture and religion. The very worst attacks come when we publish about homosexuality.”

“We have received threats to our safety. Our women journalists' names and information have been shared online, so they receive direct messages on their phones or social media with abuse and harassment. They have been called all kinds of degrading things, like 'prostitutes'. The partners of our journalists are harassed, too. The majority of all the threats and abuse we have received have come from the same group of conservative men who had created a large number of fake profiles. Now we block them.”

“The attacks make us feel highly uncomfortable, and they create a pressure from the community on not just us, but also on our families and on the women sources we work with. The sources' families try to scare them from talking to us or to convince our journalists to leave their jobs. It is like this everywhere, not just in Syria. As a woman journalist, you have to wear a mental iron jacket at all times.”

Why is it urgent to address these issues?

Gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech are by no means limited to the digital sphere; on the contrary, sexism, homophobia and transphobia are common in broadcast, radio, and print media, too. However, online gender-based violence has reached unprecedented heights in the digital age, particularly in the eras of Big Tech and social media and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Digital infrastructure has provided new tools to increase the scale, omnipresence and speed of online gender-based violence. It does not merely mirror the misogyny and inequality that exist offline, but in many cases accelerates and worsens it. Today, social media companies are the main enablers of online violence against women journalists due to their technical design, business models and lack of gender-sensitive solutions.⁹

Simultaneously, journalists are finding it harder to stay safe as social media has become an integral part of many media outlets' communication strategies. Unfortunately, most media organisations' mechanisms and policies, as well as local laws to protect women and non-binary people in media from online attacks, have not kept up with the pace of change, leaving journalists unprotected. Few countries currently have the legal frameworks, legal definitions or resources in law enforcement to properly address issues of online violence, including gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech.

Online violence has real life consequences, similar to those of violence in the physical world. In Pakistan, nine out of 10 women journalists reported that their mental health has been affected, and globally cases of stress, anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and suicide have been recorded. As a result, women journalists, who are already underrepresented in the news, use various forms of self-protection strategies such as turning down assignments, working under pseudonyms, not sharing opinions online, changing their beat to different topics or leaving the profession. Online gender-based violence is not just a private violation but a real and acute threat to freedom of expression.

Figures:

- Globally, 73 percent of women journalists have experienced online violence.¹⁰
- Twenty percent of women journalists have experienced attacks in the physical world in connection to digital violence.¹¹
- As a result of online violence, one in three women journalists have considered leaving the profession.¹²
- Eight out of 10 have self-censored in digital spaces as a response to online attacks.¹³

What can media development organisations do?

As online gender-based violence is complex and comes in many forms, the solutions must come not only from the tech industry alone but as multi-agency response. Media development organisations play an important role in this change and can take a number of actions:

1. Develop or support the installing of **online moderation and counter speech**. Counter speech is a tactic of countering hate speech or mis/disinformation by presenting an alternative narrative rather than with censorship. Online moderation can be facilitated by, for example, artificial intelligence hate speech detection programmes and be accompanied by community guidelines for all platforms for media and media self-regulatory institutions.
2. Create **monitoring mechanisms** on both organisational, local and national levels for online gender-based violence, including gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, against women and non-binary journalists, sources and others expressing themselves in media.
3. On a country level, **track and map trends**, topics and incidences that can cause spikes in gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech.
4. Supporting **third-party factcheckers** and organisations crowdsourcing and setting up data sets to identify gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech.
5. Support the **production of gender-sensitive content** through capacity building of media organisations, training of journalists and editors, development of communication or editorial guidelines on e.g., inclusive language, terminology and avoidance of stereotypes based on gender identity and sexual orientation to tackle newsroom biases and counter gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech.
6. Provide access to **legal and psychological support** for persons exposed to or at risk of gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech to protect their safety and well-being before, during and after potential digital attacks.
7. **Provide training and awareness raising** for journalists, editors and media managers on online gender-based violence, including gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, its causes and consequences as well as how to prevent and respond to such incidents.
8. Further **research** into online and offline gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech.
9. Initiatives that facilitate **the exchange of best practices** and experiences within media, media self-regulatory institutions and other relevant sectors across countries and regions.
10. **Collaborations** between media development organisations, media, civil society, tech companies and other relevant actors to hold the tech industry, states and others to account by critically reporting on lack of improvements on gender-based violence, safety of journalists, women's and LGBTQ+ rights and freedom of expression. This includes strengthening alliances and partnerships with women's organisations and LGBTQ+ organisations.

Do you want to know more?

Suggested readings:

- [The Chilling: A Global Study of online violence against women journalists](#), UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) (2022)
- [Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online](#), The Wilson Center (2021)
- [Digital Safety is a Right: Syrian Women Journalists and Human Rights Defenders in the Digital Space: Risks and Threats](#), Syrian Female Journalists Network
- [Women Journalists and the Double Bind: The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan](#), Media Matters for Democracy, 2020

Resources for media and journalists:

- [A Guide to Protecting Newsrooms and Journalists Against Online Violence](#), IWMF
- [Online Violence Response Hub](#), Coalition Against Online Violence
- [I Will Not Stay Silent](#), ARIJ (English and Arabic)

Online gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech

Published in 2023 by IMS

Editor

Malin Palm

Researcher

Nynne Storm Refsing

Cover Illustration

Moe Thander Aung

A special thanks to Dr Aida Al-Kaisy, Digital Rights Foundation (Pakistan), and Gender & Media Connect (Zimbabwe), who supported the research for this brief, as well as the anonymous participants in two focus group discussions who shared their stories and valuable insights.

© 2023 IMS The content of this publication is copyright protected. International Media Support is happy to share the text in the publication with you under the Creative Commons AttributionShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a summary of this license, please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>.



Join the global work for press freedom and stay up to date on media issues worldwide

 [forfreemedia](#)

 [InternationalMediaSupport](#)

IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.

www.mediasupport.org

Notes

1. “Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences”, Association for Progressive Communications (APC) (2017).
2. “United Nations Plan Strategy and of Plan of Action on Hate Speech”, UN, (2019).
3. “Malign Creativity How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online”, The Wilson Center, (2021).
4. “Gender Violence against journalists: Data on gender-based attacks and cases that victimized women in Brazil in 2021”, Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism (Abraji) and UNESCO, (2022).
5. “Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women’s visibility in digital publics,” Sarah Sobieraj, *Information, Communication & Society* 21, Volume 11 (2018).
6. “Online harassment field manual”, PEN America.
7. “Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts”, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), (2020).
8. “The Chilling: Global Trends in online violence against women journalists (Research discussion paper), UNESCO (2021).
9. Ibid.
10. “Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts”, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), (2020).
11. “Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impacts”, UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), (2020).
12. “Attacks and harassment: the impact on female journalists and their reporting”, TrollBusters and IWWMF, (2018)
13. “Hostile bytes: a study of online violence against women journalists”, Digital Rights Monitoring, 2019.

IMS (International Media Support) is a non-profit organisation working for global press freedom by supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.

mediasupport.org

- f** IMSInternationalMediaSupport
- t** IMSforfreedia
- @** IMSforfreedia
- in** ims-international-media-support



GOOD JOURNALISM | BETTER SOCIETIES