POLICY PAPERS: PERSPECTIVES ON GENDERED DISINFORMATION

In cooperation with the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung e.V.

HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG
FEMINISM AND
GENDER DEMOCRACY
Global Unit

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Coordinator: Hyra Basit
Editor: Shmyla Khan

Illustrator and layout design: Bushra Saleem
Design: Ahsan Zahid

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About

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a not-for-profit organisation based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women and gender minorities, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened.

DRF believes that a free internet with access to information and privacy can create safe online spaces for not only women but the world at large.

Contact information:

info@digitalrightsfoundation.pk
www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk

CONTENTS

1 LOCATING GENDER IN THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

SHMYLA AND AMNA KHAN

2 IMPOSING NARRATIVES ON THE OTHER: DECOLONIZING DISINFORMATION

ANMOL IRFAN

3 GENDERED DISINFORMATION: EXPLORING MASS MEDIA'S ROLE IN INTENTIONAL AND INADVERTENT PROPAGATION

SINDHU ABASSI

4 THE ROOTS OF GENDERED DISINFORMATION: A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

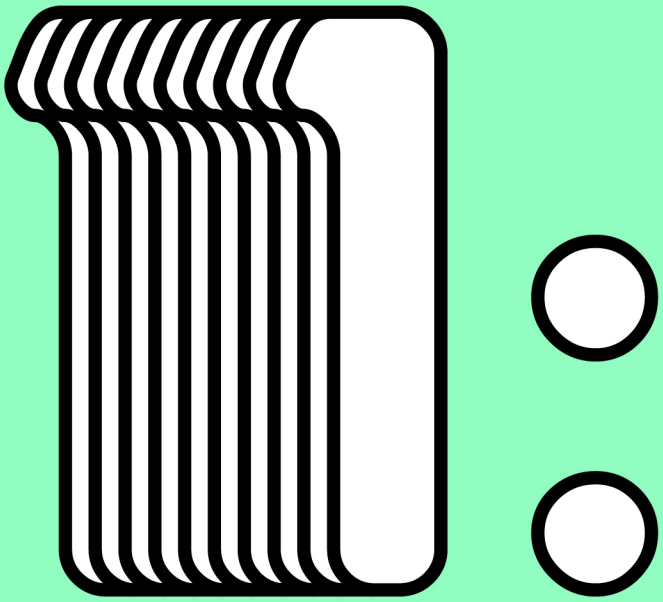
ADNAN CHAUDHRI

5 GOSSIP AND RUMOR MONGERING: ANALYSING CASUAL DISINFORMATION FROM GENDERED LENS

HIJA KAMRAN AND SALWA RANA

6 FACT-CHECK: ARTICULATING A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO GENDERED DISINFORMATION

ZOYA REHMAN

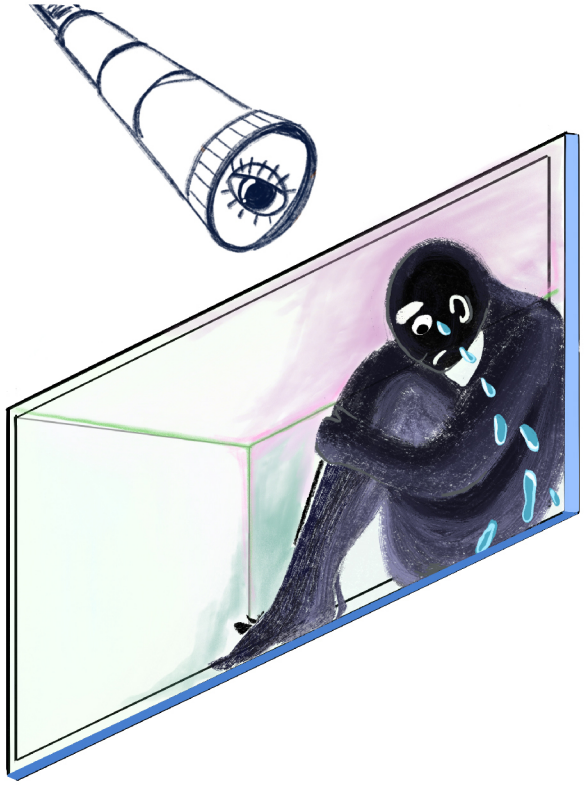


LOCATING GENDER IN THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

DEFINING GENDER DISINFORMATION

Social media has long been credited with allowing marginalized communities, particularly women, a platform to express themselves which they are otherwise denied. However, the patriarchal silencing of women that takes place in offline spaces is increasingly being translated online. Women have been targeted with online violence at a disproportionately higher rate than men, often through the weaponization of information. The duality of the role of online spaces in amplifying women's voices yet at the same time acting as a tool of their oppression has led to the characterization of social media as a "double-edged sword" for women.[1]

Gendered disinformation has emerged as one of the latest strategies being employed to silence female voices. Existing literature explains this phenomenon as similar to online disinformation, which involves the spread of false or misleading information with some degree of coordination and malign intent[2]. However, gendered disinformation makes use of sexual or misogynistic narratives against women which perpetuate a negative representation of women in society as either adversaries or victims. The goal of these campaigns, especially in targeting women politicians, journalists, or public figures, is to question their credibility, polarize their audience, and push them away from positions of power. In some cases, disinformation campaigns seek to undermine feminist movements at large. The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, for example, was pinned on the 8M International Women's Day demonstrations taking place. At the same time as dialogue was being directed away from women speaking about their issues, women were also exploited as being the victims of the pandemic, in order to criticize governments or push other political agenda[3] .Thus, in addition to the spread of misogynistic comments or doctored sexual content, gendered disinformation campaigns also involve the representation of women in stereotypically inferior roles.



LITERATURE OVERVIEW

This categorization of gender norms and stereotypes as gendered disinformation significantly obscures its definition by encompassing more than just the sharing of inaccurate information. In fact, such misleading content actually blurs the lines between gendered disinformation and misinformation.[4]While both these forms of online abuse involve the element of malign intent, misinformation is disseminated with the belief that it is true. Since this is also characteristic of stereotypes regarding gender identities, this form of content aligns with misinformation in intent and disinformation in effect. The identification of gendered disinformation is further problematized by "malign creativity – the use of coded language; iterative, context-based visual and textual memes; and other tactics".[5] Research has found that gendered disinformation often goes undetected by platform content moderators because of the situational familiarization that it requires in such cases.

Gendered disinformation has also been categorized as a form of online gender-based

abuse, which may differ in technique but is similar in its targeting of women public figures. In fact, gendered disinformation, which involves online gendered abuse and may even result in physical violence, has been categorized in existing literature not only as a threat to national security but also as a weakening of democratic processes, because of the motivation to exclude a significant part of the population.[6] This is further problematized when gendered disinformation is being disseminated by state or not state, yet state-aligned, actors that seek to silence all opposition from women against the state. The assistance of bots and troll armies in countries where women are at the forefront of opposition to 'machismo populism' magnifies the scale of gendered abuse by portraying the vocal women as involved in 'dirty politics'.[7] Along with the role of the media in furthering sexist narratives, these actors are considered to be spreading gendered disinformation sponsored by the state, which only further complicates any attempt towards accountability.

GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE

Research on gendered disinformation has highlighted the ambiguities in the term's definition, while also mapping the effects and the actors involved. However, there is still a lot of room to include the perspectives of gender minorities in their experience of this form of online violence, in order to fully understand the extent to which the intent and effect of disinformation may be gendered in nature. Most literature on gendered disinformation also primarily focuses on women public figures as targets of these campaigns, even though women and gender minorities who are not in the public eye may also be affected by the spread of sexist narratives online. Hence, there exists a need to broaden the scope of gendered disinformation in order to include women and gender minorities at large.

To this end, Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) conducted a series of focus group discussions with researchers from across the globe working in this area in order to deconstruct 'gendered disinformation', understand existing work on the subject and identify areas for future interventions. Participants pointed out similar concerns regarding the falsity behind such information, resulting from the ambiguous intentions behind stereotypical narratives and other opinions. The importance of an intersectional approach to understanding gendered disinformation was also emphasized, particularly the implications of class, caste, and race in intensifying such instances of abuse.

Many participants lamented the lack of literature emanating from the Global South, which has resulted in the centering of Western-centric experiences. The nature and impact of gender disinformation are highly contextual, and unless voices from those contexts are not heard we cannot arrive at a truly intersectional understanding of gender disinformation.

Regarding possible responses to gendered disinformation, the focus group discussions highlighted a shared distrust in platform regulation, owing to the arbitrary nature with which content moderators often operate. The question of anonymity was also problematized as facilitating gendered abuse while also allowing for greater participation of women and gender minorities online. Rather than relying on social media platforms, the discussions supported community-driven approaches to countering gendered disinformation, emphasizing the need for a more gender-sensitive reporting in media and rejection of sexist narratives being disseminated, in order to have a wider impact on tackling gender biases in society at large.

Given that gendered disinformation was a nebulous term for many, the lack of definitional clarity is both a challenge and an opportunity. This report capitalizes on the opportunity to bring together narratives and perspectives that are hyper-local yet at the same time connect to the global conversation

on gendered disinformation. Employing feminist methodology on drawing from lived experiences, the series of policy papers take these experiences to build to definitions, theories and policy recommendations from the ground-up.

STRUCTURE OF REPORT

The second chapter, written by Anmol Irfan, seeks to deconstruct the narratives surrounding women from the Global South from the lens of decolonization. She makes the case for categorizing reductive narratives as gendered disinformation. She draws from a variety of experiences from the Global South to call out portrayals of women in the Western mainstream media. Feminists in the Global South are constantly misrepresented without the ability to call out these portrayals for what they are—inaccurate and harmful, grounded in colonial tropes and white supremacist ordering of information.

Building on the feminist critique of the media, the third chapter by Sindhu Abassi does a deep dive into media narratives from the perspective of holding media institutions accountable for gendered disinformation. Drawing from her experience as a journalist, Sindhu looks at the limitations of the media that lead to the creation and perpetuation of gendered disinformation.

In the next chapter, Adnan Chaudhri focuses specifically on a historical case study of the trajectory of the feminist movement in Pakistan to draw comparisons between contemporary examples of gendered disinformation. By presenting the anatomy of a gender disinformation campaign directed towards political movements led by women and gender minorities, many will be able to identify a similar pattern and playbook in other parts of the world.

Hija Kamran and Salwa Rana in their paper look at rumors and gossip, which are dismissed as ‘feminine’ preoccupations, as forms of gendered disinformation. Harms that accrue to women are often trivialized because they cause harm to bodies that we as society place less value on, thus by centering forms of disinformation that are seen as individualized and depoliticized the paper reconstructs our understanding of gendered disinformation. The paper also analyzes possible legal interventions to address gendered disinformation, while mounting a critique of existing legal tools tasked with addressing such harms.

Lastly, Zoya Rehman in the sixth chapter articulates an approach to gendered disinformation that creates alternate forms of information, counter-publics and sources of knowledge to dismantle dominant ways of knowing. The chapter bookends themes discussed in this anthology by positing a way forward grounded in feminist praxis.

CONTRIBUTION OF REPORT

Many of the authors drew from experiences closest to them. The Global South is a complex place that cannot be treated as a monolith. We asked the authors to imagine a Global South for themselves, some papers reflect a wider geographical landscape where they jump from country to country to draw connections, while others favor specificity grounded in the context they were located in. Given that all of the authors are located

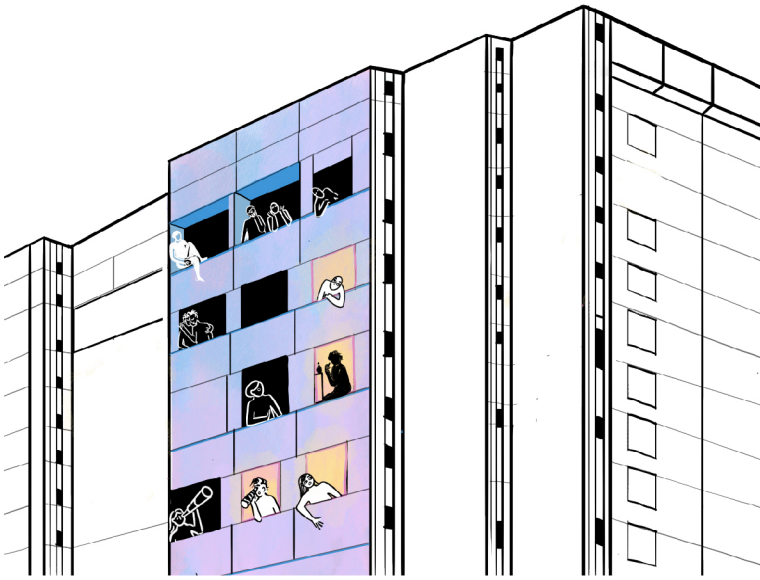
in Pakistan, this anthology only strives to provide a perspective on the Global South, not a comprehensive one. Hopefully, however, it will serve as a valuable starting point for future work.

Through these mediations on gendered disinformation, and the variety of perspectives that the authors bring, we call into question hegemonic structures of knowledge production. The anthology forces us to call into question the very idea of objectivity, blurring lines between 'truth' and 'lies'. The report contains experiences where women have been harmed equally by untrue information, half-truths and narratives that reflect deep-seated biases rather than deliberate lies. For the discourse on gendered disinformation to encompass all these experiences requires a larger contemplation on what we mean by 'objective truth'.

These observations have implications not just in the realm of theory, but fields such as the media and law. Many of the papers ask the question of whether legal interventions can be called in to address the rise of gendered disinformation. What they find instead are the limits of the law itself, its inability to address social harms in a holistic manner and the possibility of creating larger issues in terms of the fall out of free speech and other freedoms.

By placing the lived experiences and gendered harms at the core of their analysis, each of these papers tell a larger story of disinformation that break hackneyed understandings of technology and society. In what Cabanes calls "moral panics about digital disinformation", we have come to "overinflate the manipulative power of technologies and assume that dumbed-down social media users are unable to recognize truths and lies".[8] This anthology seeks to break away from this reductive approach by telling stories that center experiences of how individuals and communities experience structures and the society that receives that information.

Thus, there is value in focusing on false narratives that reveal to us a lot of truths about ourselves. Disinformation in and of itself may or may not be harmful, but it is the larger political and social context in which it operates that gives it the power that it currently has. Words, information, narratives, stories, and rumors all matter, but they matter more in some contexts. It is by placing the context—places in the Global South—at the starting point of our analysis that we can become cognizant of the "constantly shifting landscape of resonances, dissonances, and counterpoints to the deeply held social views that people have about their socio-political realities".[9] Gendered disinformation tells us little about who it targets, but it reveals to us a lot about the people spreading it and the society that enables it.



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[9] Ibid.

IMPOSING NARRATIVES ON THE OTHER: DECOLONIZING DISINFORMATION

National Identity Proof
Name
Father Name
Gender
Identity Number
Date of Birth
Issue
Expiry
Signature
National Identity Proof
GENDER
PROOF OF EXISTENCE
WHO ARE YOU?
ARE YOU ACCEPTABLE?
Signature

INTRODUCTION

Following the departure of US forces from Afghanistan, and the formation of a Taliban government, eyes across the globe are focused on what will happen next in the country, which has been the victim of the United States' longest war.[1] More specifically those eyes are focused on Afghan women, as fears around the mistreatment of women in the country under the Taliban have surfaced - made worse by news reports around gender segregation at universities [2] and women journalists losing their jobs.[3] In early September, pictures of two male journalists in Afghanistan surfaced bearing marks of heavy abuse and beatings on their bodies.[4] Yet by and large - media coverage around the Afghanistan crisis continues to focus on women. There is this presumption that Afghan women need 'saving', and that only western liberation can save them. It is a phenomenon activist and writer Mona Elthaway describes as being stuck between 'rock', and a 'hard place' because while the former group of racists and Islamophobes who villainize Muslim societies are the rock, the 'hard place' is misogynists within Muslim societies who attempt to disenfranchise local feminist movements by saying those local activists are giving their own cultures a bad name by calling out their wrongs. "Neither the 'rock', nor the 'hard place' actually care about Muslim women," Elthaway says.

In fact maintaining a specific narrative around women and feminist movements - particularly those based in the Global South - benefits both the parties Eltahawy mentions. These attempts at shaping narratives around global feminist movements is part of the much larger issue of media disinformation campaigns that take on a gendered lens. Gendered Disinformation - as it is termed - is defined by the organization 'She Persisted' as the "spread of deceptive or inaccurate information and images against women political leaders, journalists and female public figures, following story lines that draw on misogyny, as well as gender stereotypes around the role of women in order to undermine their perceptions of their participation in public life."[5] Emma Lygnerud Bober, Gender and Programme Development Adviser at IMS (International Media Support), an organization that works for global press freedoms further adds that the definition includes 'misleading narratives', that ultimately push women out of public spaces.[6] But the wide scope that media outlets hold, within social media spheres, fictional narratives and news and journalism, makes us question whether the far reaching impact of gendered disinformation can be packaged neatly into dictionary definitions. The use and impact of disinformation in a gendered way is also greatly impacted by the cultural context it is positioned in. Priyam Nayak, disinformation analyst at tech company Logically working on battling disinformation in India, points out that there's often many unexplored layers to gendered disinformation, adding that "gendered disinformation in India cannot be fully understood without the context of class and caste, and the caste element has still been largely ignored.[7]"

Existing research around gendered disinformation still focuses largely on specific Global North countries, which is what leads to nuanced discussions, such as what Nayak points out, being left out of policy discussions and attempts at change. As recently as February 2021, IMS made recommendations to UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan who was working on a report around Online Disinformation, which included the suggestion that the report adopt a universal definition for gendered disinformation. The subsequent document , which benefited from submissions from over a 100 different contributors, did not provide that universal definition. This paper will analyze why a lack of universal definition is not a failure of understanding the problem, but rather a starting point into understanding the nuances and complexities of the way in which gendered

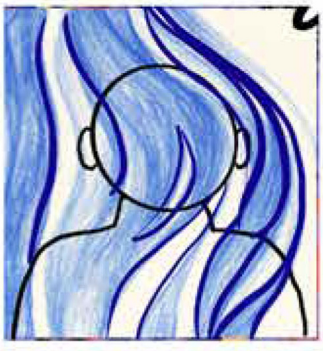
disinformation[8] can present itself. 'Good'[9] and 'bad' feminist tropes, sensationalized reporting by local and international media, and preying on misconceptions all contribute to the way feminist movements are perceived within media - and can often link to how successful they may be. By engaging with activism and feminist movements based primarily in the Global South, it will seek to provide a more global context for current attempts at countering gendered disinformation. It will also look at why disinformation may not always be as malicious as we think, and how a lack of better information or lack of diverse voices in a debate can also contribute to aiding disinformation campaigns online. By looking at the often understated ways in which disinformation can aid more malicious campaigns, this paper will talk about how everyday citizens can get caught up within the tangled web of gendered disinformation and how engaging with global experts can help us better understand feminist movements and their progress.

IMPOSING NARRATIVES ON COMMUNITIES OUTSIDE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Online engagement and media accessibility has allowed information to travel fast, and opinions can be established equally as fast. That desire for audience engagement, coupled with reducing attention spans can often lead to 'clickbaity' and sensationalized headlines, that can get to even the most well-meaning of audiences. With the rise of voices like Julie Khan and Nadeem Kashish within the media landscape in Pakistan, mistreatment of the trans and Khawajasira community in the country is slowly being brought to light. But even well-intentioned allies can mistake the good they are doing. Both Khan and Kashish have expressed their dislike for the label 'trans', a label they feel comes with a very Western lens that takes away from their identity as members of the Khawajasira community, a more indigenously-rooted identity. But such complaints are rarely seen within local media, perhaps despite all the media attention around them, sensationalist headlines calling for pity and rehashing trauma rarely leave room for them to actually have a seat at the table. Pity, and a general lens of victimization seems to be the dominant narrative by which mainstream media outlets view feminist activists operating outside of the Western sphere. Whether it was the singular lens placed on Loujain Al-Hathloul following her release in Saudi Arabia which ignored the fact that many other women's rights activists were still jailed and the fact that Al-Hathloul was nowhere close to being free,[10] or the title of 'Simone De Beavouir of the Arab World'[11] being imposed on Nawaal El-Sadaawi—feminists outside of the Global North have long struggled for the media to understand them within their contexts.

El-Sadaawi is an interesting example. While she sought exile in the US due to threats and possible jail time for her outspoken stance against Female Genital Mutilation and speaking up regarding women's sexuality in Egypt she was the darling of the Western media, but she ended up angering feminists in the US when her views deviated from the box she was put in. It was easy for Western media to paint her as an equivalent of a European writer and to talk about her stance against the veil, but few highlight her stance against makeup and revealing clothes[12] which she also saw as an equal imposition of the patriarchy. The one dimensional portrayal cast her as a rebel who spoke out against Arab oppression and was 'saved' when she found freedom in the US. The truth is, she wasn't the Simone De Beauvoir of anything - because she was simply Nawaal El Sadaawi, a feminist to be understood in her own terms and context.

However, acknowledging that would force the media to change its own pity-centered narrative associated with feminists in the Global South. This imposition of narratives isn't the first thing that comes to mind when talking about disinformation but it is equally important to understand the more understated ways in which mainstream narratives and information impact feminist movements. By taking a gendered disinformation lens to these narratives global movements can start to challenge the disparity between what is considered disinformation by mainstream media and what it means for them. The stereotyping and misleading narratives around feminist movements in the Global South risk impacting the support they receive both locally and globally, as well as resource allocation as the paper will discuss later on.

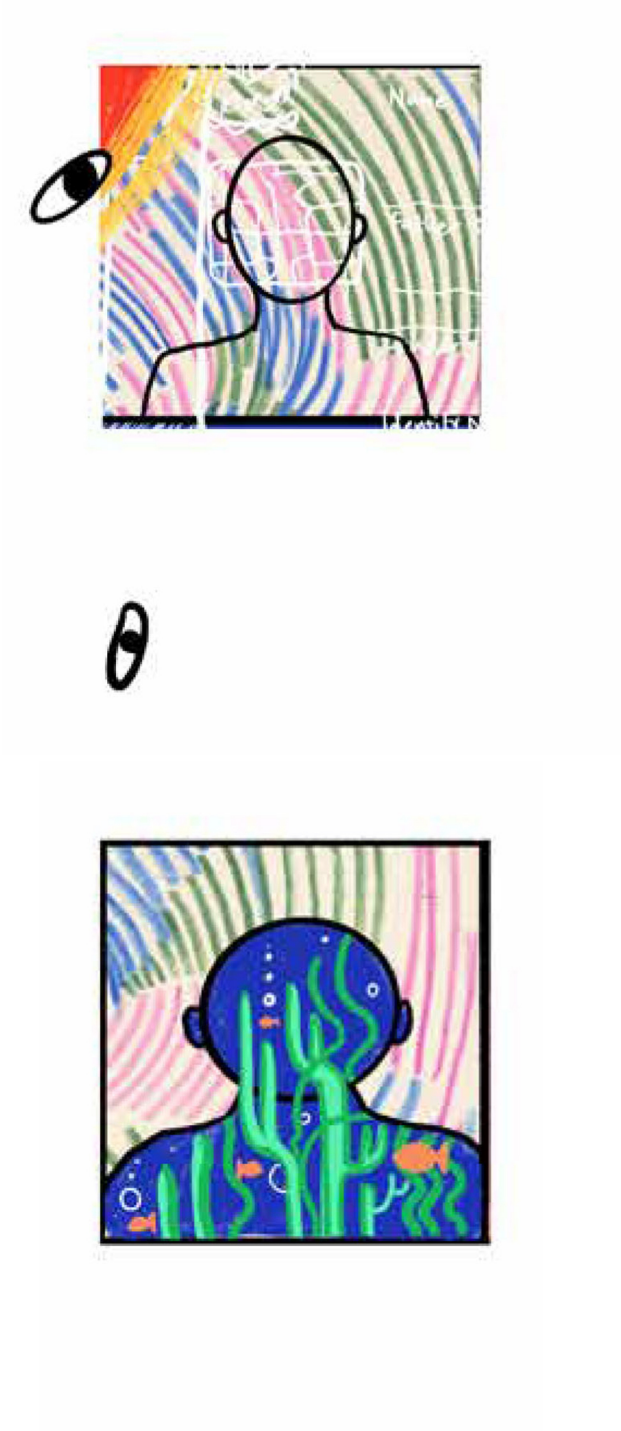


ONLINE ATTACKS THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

As Heather Barr points out, narratives of pity and trauma are then used against women in patriarchal cultures to further demean their efforts to fight for change. As Associate Director of the women's rights division at Human Rights Watch, Barr has spent the last three years in South Asia - working on aiding a range of feminist movements across Asia. "I don't think that men in Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or [South] Korea actually believe that women can't lead these fights or movements, they've grown up in households where the women have always had to fight. It's more about this being useful rhetoric to make these movements seem less important to the masses," she says. Barr has also worked on a project detailing the impact 'digital sex crimes' [13]have been having on women and girls in South Korea. "However in 2018, 8 protests were organized across the country, and most of them were facilitated through Twitter. These platforms are pretty misogynistic and yet women are still finding ways to use them in amazing ways," she says.[14]

Incidents such as these are reminders that beyond the countries were human rights organizations and non-state actors have the power to demand for justice, feminist movements are left to fend largely for themselves. Even during South Korea's 'digital sex crimes' crisis, reporting those crimes was only the first step in a long fight. Only 2% of digital sex crime offenders in 2017 were imprisoned and in 2019, prosecutors dropped 43.5% of cases[15]against digital sex offenders. So it is often left up to women to fend for themselves. Encouragingly, the growing number of women-led NGOs, support groups and safe spaces gives credence to how important it has become for women to find ways of supporting themselves. Talking about disinformation in India, Nayak points to women-led organizations working to increase digital literacy in rural areas by overcoming language barriers and lack of digital literacy; these make Indian women prone to disinformation to a greater extent. Lucina Di Meco, the co-founder of She Persisted Global, advocates for greater supporting extended to women and gender minorities in tackling gendered disinformation by challenging the idea that women have to fight disinformation on their own. When interviewed for this paper, she points out that "it's important to debunk the myth that women can challenge online harm and violence and disinformation themselves because that puts an overwhelming pressure on women". It's clear that the misogyny rampant on social media platforms actively limits feminist organizing. This is facilitated by the very business models and policies of social media. Di Meco points out that social media companies are businesses driven by profits: "The truth is social media companies profit from such attacks, because when a picture is shared multiple times, they then use those engagement rates to get advertisers". She adds that the problem also comes from how little transparency we ask from these companies, especially in comparison to the power they hold. "Before you needed contacts, money, and influence over media channels, but now you can make the same message go viral with relatively few resources," Di Meco shares while talking about why it's important to hold social media companies accountable. With regards to reporting violations, disinformation and even online abuse, Di Meco says it can at times take up to a 100 days for complaints to be heard, with times being even longer for countries outside Western Europe and North America because there's less media pressure to do so there. "During the last few Indian elections, officials from the Prime Minister's Bharatiya Janata Party

Party (BJP) were found to be spreading misinformation and coordinating fake accounts, and Facebook turned a blind eye despite their actions being exposed," she says of the incident.



DOMINANCE OF WESTERN NARRATIVES

While the way in which feminist movements face disinformation varies across cultures, one thing tends to remain common - the disenfranchising of feminist activists through radicalized and racialized tropes in the media. Barr, speaking for this article, points out that a vast majority of the cyber hate she's seen against feminist movements often links in some form to stereotypical ideas of feminists as "boring, ugly, not fun, and the idea that anyone who believes in women's rights is an ugly humorless person." Rosebell Kagumire, the editor of Afri-feminists—a pan-African space that explores African feminisms through lived experiences—talks about how so much of the work African do is just dealing with the legacies of colonialism left behind in African communities, and the gender binaries and roles those colonial histories created. So when media narratives paint feminists with the same brush, which as Barr points out is far from truthful or nuanced, they strip away the experiences and narratives of so many cultures across the globe. While social media is often lauded for being an endless gateway to information, it is also becoming increasingly clear that it only favors a certain type of information. These same narratives that need to be heard in order to challenge patriarchal, colonial structures are left out of the mix because they do not reward social media platforms with high engagement. The problem this poses for African feminists is similar to Elthawy's description of the 'rock' and the 'hard' place. The lack of global media attention to voices on the ground and privileging of stereotypes hinders the way they receive global support. On the other hand, local media and narratives often do provide relief as well because of the way in which it pits 'good' and 'bad' feminists against each other.

Western media stereotypes around global feminists movements have always prioritized some feminist movements over others. Whether that be how the acceptance around a woman's choice to wear clothes of her choice disappears when women choose to wear the burqa, certain feminists have always been acceptable in mainstream narratives. Kagumire says that "I'm always worried if people in the mainstream media—which is still patriarchal—think you're the 'good' feminist, then you're not doing enough work. Feminism is meant to shake up the status quo and that play of good and bad feminists is definitely there because the bad feminist is the radical feminist asking for transformation and challenging the status quo, the good feminist becomes someone who kind of talks on these ideals but still taps into all these traditional expectations and that affects the way in which the movement can present a unified front". When both global and local media fails to accurately capture the essence of feminist progress, and instead creates fear or negative stereotypes around them, it makes it that much difficult to dig under all of that media noise to reach the real or more authentic story.

The relationship between disinformation and what we consider to be factual information is also important because disinformation only exists to counter what is seen as the "correct narrative", however obscures the diverse sets of correct narratives out there. Kagumire points out that until we accept the diverse histories, and cultural contexts of feminist movements we will never be able to challenge them. It's easy for reports to talk about how Black and Asian women MPs in the UK receive 35% more abuse than other groups of MPs[16] but a lot harder to delve into the differences of the way that abuse may be targeted and the ability of certain groups to fight against it. Multiple countries across the globe have sought to criminalize non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit images, online harassment or hate speech as obvious instances of gendered disinformation that present in the form of abuse. However these larger structural issues are more difficult to address, because less obvious ways in which disinformation can work are not found commonly within dominantly white or Global North communities. These structural impediments include issues of caste and its socio-economic factors as Nayak pointed out, digital literacy divides across gender or the stereotyping of non-white non-western feminist movements.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CONTEXTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON FEMINIST PROGRESS

Logically AI, the tech company where Nayak works, focuses on dealing with misinformation online but fact-checking and the business of tackling misinformation in India is still new. Even when fact-checking is taking place, the information produced is often not consumed by people in India who are not fluent in English. She talks about her paternal aunt, who watches predominantly Bengali news and thus has to rely on Bengali communication due to a lack of fluency in English, which makes her dependent on either limited Bengali information sources or the men in her life who did have access to English literacy, like her brother - Nayak's father. "In a country like India where you have so many vernacular languages, and for post-independence society the English medium has been a matter of privilege, it is still not easily accessible in many parts of the country. Daughters weren't given the same quality education as sons in the family," says Nayak, of the systemic disadvantage present against women in India.

Language barriers and cultural nuances being ignored have created similar restrictions in Pakistan. Aisha Nazir, a feminist organizer in Multan said she struggled to get communities on board. "Whenever I would mention feminism, the response I would get would be that such events aren't for our communities, that they're 'big city issues'," she said.[17] She added that removing the word 'feminist' from initial communications and explaining the cause before donning the label caused her audience to understand that 'feminism' wasn't a dirty word. For this paper, Edie, head of content at Logically describes disinformation as a phenomenon that "exacerbates existing social inequalities". She points out that this includes how healthcare guidelines regarding vaccinations for pregnant women have been badly mishandled, or fear mongering against trans people in light of proposed laws.

In South Asia, this can be seen in the lack of access to education that many rural women are disadvantaged by, or the taboos around conversations like health and sexuality that can lead to disinformation around how women understand their bodies.

Feminists in the Global South have had to fight a very different battle when it comes to making feminist movements successful - that of overcoming the social and political stigmas that exist around the very term feminism. In the absence of policies that aim to dismantle white supremacist structures in mainstream feminist movements across the world, reductive narratives about these Global South movements start of emerge despite their best efforts. The danger is furthered when those within positions of power and influence in feminist circles conform to those same narratives. The recent Texas abortion ban and its comparison to the Taliban and Sharia law by pro-choice advocates, demonstrates how easily the role of white supremacist patriarchy is ignored in favor of stereotypes of the treatment of women in Islamic communities.[18] The ban incidentally came the same week as Mexico's law to decriminalize abortion, which follows the example of a similar law from Argentina which came into effect last year. Barr points out the irony in these two bills being passed at the same time, when most mainstream media narratives would put Latin America far behind the United States in terms of progress for women's rights. "Our director [of HRW] is from Chile, and she says she's invited to speak about how women's group in US can help those in Latin America, and it is never the opposite conversation despite the progress Latin American feminist groups have made," she says.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION AND POLICY DISCRIMINATION

That's also because many grassroots movements in the Global South start off at an automatic disadvantage due to lack of resources, access to networks, and digital literacy. Sofia, the Tech and Data Strategist at FRIDA, the Young Feminist Fund[19] says that stakes for feminists in the Global South can often be much higher, pointing to the activists in Mexico fighting for reproductive rights who had to change their online identities or methods of communication to avoid harassment both from sexist trolls and government surveillance. "I think the more sinister and invisibilized impact of gendered disinformation is on grassroots movements. It has a broader effect on feminist expression, since other activists start to fear similar situations and feel inhibited to engage online," she says. Adding, "In short there is a difference between the online sexism that a political candidate in the global north experiences versus a journalist in rural Mexico who is exposing the dirty environmental dealings of a mining project."

A major reason that Sofia believes caters to these varied experiences across the globe is the lack of infrastructure and support available to feminist organizers. Di Meco points out that the division of resources, or lack thereof needs to be challenged. "Most of the think tanks with global funding do not take a gendered lens at all in their work. It's almost as if for them women have nothing to do with democracy. And then you have women's rights movements that are traditionally underfunded who are very responsive to this issue and ultimately want to think about solutions but don't have the resources to do anything about it," she says. A white paper developed by

the Canadian Women Leaders Digital Defence Initiative points out the need for policies that understand the structures behind social media content and engagement that lead to disinformation against women being so widespread and developing regulatory mechanisms that can control those attacks[20] instead of putting the onus on individual feminist organizers who lack the resources to fight such large systemic biases. Sofia also believes there needs to be support for development of feminist tech infrastructure and founders on a larger scale as and that would "help shift us away from dependence on corporate tech that lacks real accountability for getting rid of gendered disinformation and other forms of patriarchal violence on their platforms."

What is majorly absent from the debate around disinformation is the responsibility that state organizations, international bodies and global leaders have in challenging what it really means to be a feminist within cultural context and navigating the struggles those feminist activists have to go through to achieve their means. Policies need to be far more nuanced, and the debate should be less about what the definition of gendered disinformation is and more about countering the very real impact of gendered disinformation, holding perpetrators accountable and setting up mechanisms that ensure accountability stays.

There needs to be a reimagining for accountability for harms stemming from gendered disinformation. While the most prominent form of accountability comes from state-mandated punishments and legal interventions to punish individuals, it is also important to call out other actors responsible. Social media companies need to do more to ensure gender protection and counter the gendered impact of disinformation by developing better policies and becoming more transparent. Policy making bodies need to have a diversity of voices and experts that can decide what the implications of polices would be in global contexts, not just the Global North where most of the policy making happens. Global funds should also be better distributed to organizations countering gendered narratives on the ground. Feminist organizers are undoubtedly doing the work, but as Kagumire pointed out, until an uncritical "united front" is put forth feminist progress will continue to be limited by gendered disinformation attempts that seem to have far more power than individual feminist organizers and collectives across the world.

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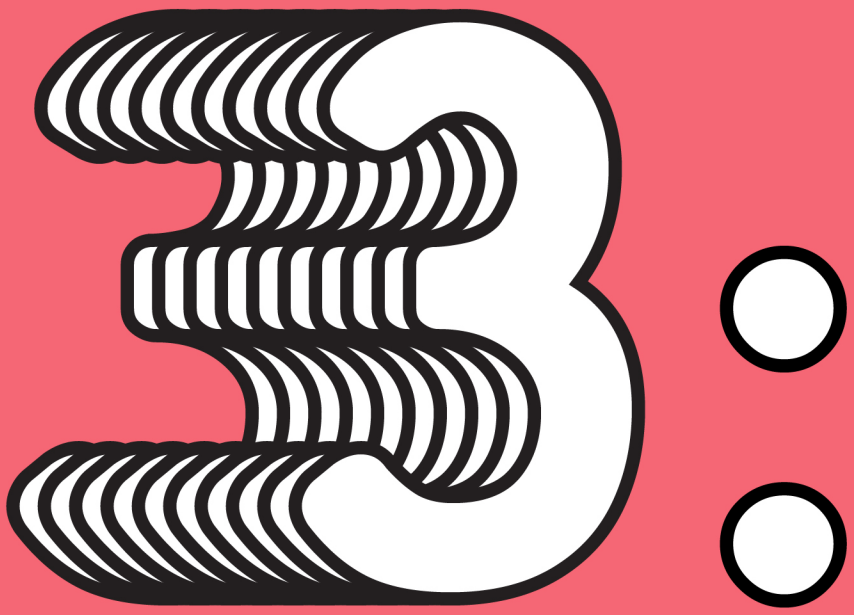

GENDERED DISINFORMATION: EXPLORING MASS MEDIA'S ROLE IN INTENTIONAL AND INADVERTENT PROPAGATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research aims to study the intentional and inadvertent role of mass media in propagating gendered disinformation. To truly understand the increasingly dangerous phenomenon of disinformation, it is essential that the role of media, chiefly mass media but also social media, is explored. This is because the mass media has a huge reach, that is, for example, not available to platforms and organisations, such as non-governmental organisations, lawyer associations and activist groups, that tackle similar civil society issues but in other ways. While the internet is emerging as a counter-space, it is important to ensure that these spaces do not become conduits of disinformation and propaganda.

The key conclusions of this research are:

- Countries with thriving social media communities but severe internet clampdown and threats by the state and other traditional players need a dedicated discourse on gendered disinformation.

- Stakeholders need to agree on working definitions for disinformation and gendered disinformation so there is greater clarity among all stakeholders particularly policymakers.

- Gendered disinformation should be analysed from multiple angles similar to other violence against women. It is strongly linked to the patriarchal and anti-women ideas and systems prevalent in the societies it operates in, which translate into and amplify this in the digital arena.

- There is a misogynistic element to the idea that the personal data and information of a woman is not hers, but is public property. The idea stems from the same mindset that women occupying public or outside spaces are public property and are inviting violence on themselves. Holistic approaches are needed to tackle not just gendered disinformation, which is often the manifestation of a larger problem, but patriarchal mindsets as well. The disinformation propagated intentionally is a result of deep-rooted misogyny in the society that targets women both online and offline.

- Gendered disinformation propagated by the media in Pakistan can be divided into three categories: (1) disinformation; (2) disinformation due to lack of local practices and mechanisms that ensure objective gender reporting; (3) and disinformation due to under-reporting or diluted reporting due to security concerns or cultural sensitivities. These are explained by examples later in the research, and shows, within this paper's scope, why the latter two should also be termed disinformation and not misinformation (unintentional propagation of incorrect/false news).

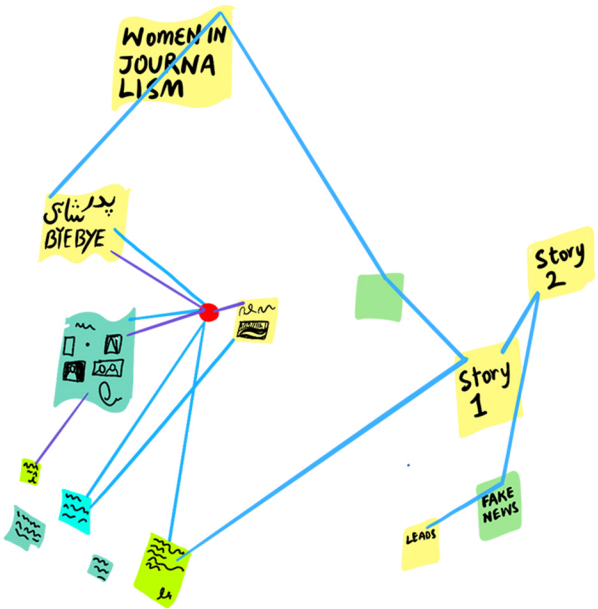
- A lack of standard editorial policies and fact-check mechanisms are a major reason for the propagation of gendered disinformation. As explained later in the report, refusal to adopt aforementioned practices and hiring more female and gender sensitised staff can contribute to desensitised gender reporting and gendered disinformation. However, media houses are notorious for putting little to no effort in hiring and retaining female staff. Globally, too, women form a low percentage of subjects being interviewed for any topic or used as experts.

- In some cultural contexts, threats, access issues and a "tribal" and "honour" culture results in diluting gender reporting, which can ultimately be called gendered disinformation happening over the long-term. This can be observed more recently in Afghanistan after the Taliban came into power and restricted the role of women in the news and television (RSF, 2021).

- Women journalists are routinely targeted online by accounts largely believed to be associated with the state and the ruling parties. Attacks have been directed at women in media across the world including places like in Russia and India, where pro-ruling party members published journalists' private information and encouraged online abuse against them.

- The state is often involved in gendered disinformation against women journalists and activists who speak out against it. Even when the government legislates on issues such as misinformation and disinformation, it does so without taking stakeholder input, or completely ignores it which results in policies which are draconian.

- In countries where the media is either underfunded or shrinking, or both, there is often no policy on disinformation.



INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore gendered disinformation as propagated by the media, whether intentionally or as a result of a lack of mechanisms to ensure objective and fact-based gender reporting, which could then contribute to gendered disinformation. The media here means chiefly the news media, television, print and digital news outlets, but also includes some independent and individual digital content outlets that comment on news and culture.

According to the UN's handbook on journalism and disinformation, "disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors" (UNESCO, 2018).

Disinformation is a serious and urgent challenge facing internet users and democracies. Like other kinds of internet abuse and cybercrime, disinformation has been weaponized against women and other marginalised groups. Gendered disinformation "can be understood as the dissemination of false or misleading information attacking women (especially political leaders, journalists and public figures), basing the attack on their identity as women..." according to the EU Disinfo Lab. "The techniques for diffusing gendered disinformation are diverse and include misogynist comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, sexualisation and the diffusion of graphic contents, online harassment and cyber-attacks. Gendered disinformation has the effect of perpetuating a negative perception of women in society: it undermines women's credibility in occupying positions of power, discourages women from participating in the public debate, and serves to silence women in general," it adds (EU DisinfoLab, 2020).

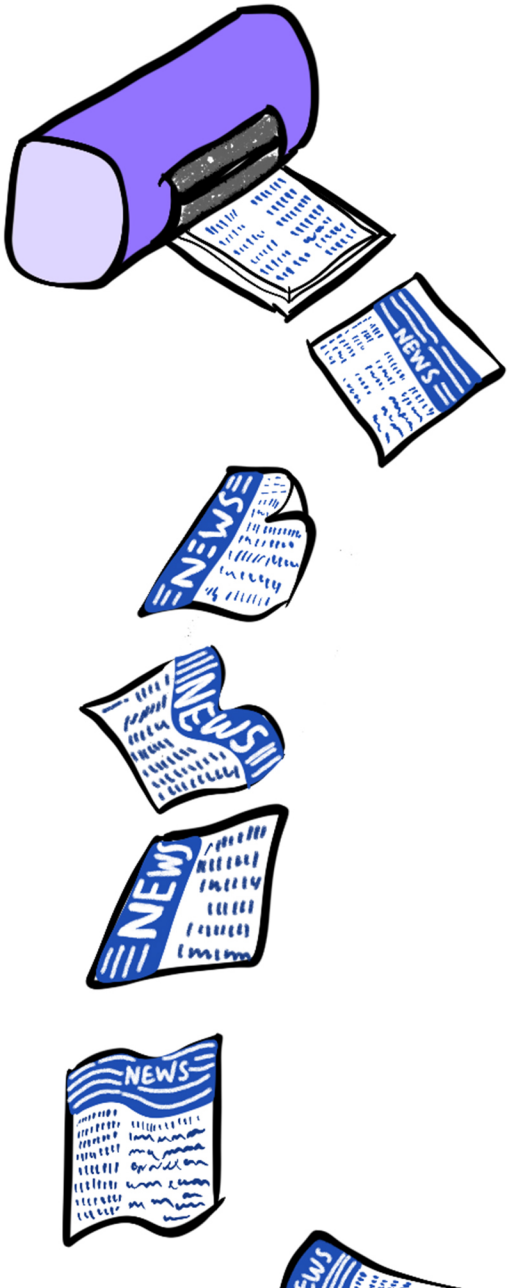
While there has been some research on this subject in the Global North, no such proper research exists for most contexts in the Global South exploring the gender aspect. Overall there is a need for research on gendered disinformation in Asia, and particularly in the subcontinent, where there has been a parallel rise in internet use and abuse of digital technologies, such as employing surveillance, by increasingly authoritarian governments (Ali, U. and Jahangir, R., 2019). In these countries coordinated hashtag campaigns on Twitter are regularly conducted against women journalists by accounts associated with the state and the ruling parties; these threats were in addition to routine threats faced by the media (Posetti, Shabbir, Maynard, Bontcheva, Aboulez, 2021). This chapter will explore gendered disinformation, and connect it to the larger anti-women cultures and systems in place as well as issues emanating from an increasingly authoritarian world.

LIMITATIONS

The research is focused on the different aspects of the propagation of gendered disinformation, intentionally or inadvertently, by the media. It is aimed at explaining how media can contribute to this issue, the mechanisms, policies, rules, or lack thereof. It aims to do so by quoting relevant and publicly available examples and information of media contributing to this trend. The research also aims to define what gendered disinformation could mean in the context of media's editorial responsibilities towards ensuring objective and fair journalism, and being cognizant of responsible journalism that does not intend malignant hurt towards oppressed groups, such as sexual and gender minorities. The research does not, however, delve in detail into other issues such as the ideological leanings of media groups historically and their evolution (if any) and why they hold those leanings; politics and competition of any kind within and between different media groups; technological infrastructure and access issues; and how all these factors may have contributed to gendered disinformation propagated by media. This study should be considered as a preliminary research to map gendered disinformation across the globe.

METHODOLOGY

The research has been written in the manner of a journalistic, investigative report where primary research was conducted in Pakistan but secondary research from across the globe was used for analysis. Three women journalists based in areas under-reported in mainstream media were interviewed for the research to make it as diverse and representative as possible. A set questionnaire was provided to them, and they were asked to answer according to their understanding of the questions and definitions. The research also draws from secondary, published research globally, and some previously published research by the author.



GENDERED DISINFORMATION: AN INTRODUCTION

In the lead-up to the 2018 Brazilian Election, which saw President Jair Bolsonaro come to power, there was immense proliferation of disinformation in the country with platforms such as WhatsApp being weaponized to proliferate such information (Avelar, 2019). However much of this disinformation was designed to engender moral panic around gender and sexuality. Thales Vilela Lelo and Lorena Caminhas point out in their research that opposition parties were regularly targeted with false news. For instance, it was falsely reported that Fernando Haddad, candidate for the Workers' Party (PT), had defended pedophilia and incest in one of his books (Caminhas & Lelo, 2021).

In 1998, religious and right-wing parties, assisted by the military establishment, airdropped leaflets of two women in clothes considered "immodest" in Pakistan. The women were Benazir Bhutto, former prime minister who was killed almost two decades later, and her mother. The pictures were doctored and distributed in an attempt to sway public opinion against Benazir Bhutto, who was campaigning in elections for the national government. Religious clerics and the political parties wanted to tell Pakistanis that these women were unislamic and divorced from "Pakistani culture" and thus not worthy of political office (Weaver, 1993).

Disinformation about migrants from the Global South manifest in host countries in gendered ways to create panic and xenophobic attitudes. For instance in the lead up to the 2021 Election in Germany, there was an uptick in hate speech and anti-migrant narratives on social media. Part of the disinformation constructed focused on stereotypes of migrant men as violent in an effort to otherize them. The focus of this disinformation on violent sexual crimes, "For example, a post by AfD-Fraktion NRW claimed that 46% of gang rapists do not possess German citizenship. This is not untrue, but uses the statistics provided by the Ministry of the Interior of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia, (which found that 53.9% of group rape suspects are German) in a way intended to stoke division." (Mathelemuse et al., 2021)

Accurate information, leaked without consent or framed in harmful ways, can result in violence for women in the Global South. On October 27, 2020, a teenage girl in Layyah, a small town in Pakistan's Punjab, was raped by an employee of a welfare initiative introduced by the government. She was raped in her house. The man obtained the girl's address after she and her mother had visited a government office to register for the programme. The man was eventually arrested. (Chaudhry, 2020).

Four years before the Layyah teen faced this violence, another woman was murdered, allegedly by her brother, who was allegedly egged on by an influential cleric. The woman was Qandeel Baloch, who was a social media celebrity, or an 'influencer' in today's internet parlance, who used to post pictures and videos of herself considered risque. Qandeel was not her real name, and Pakistanis were made aware of this fact after a media house ran her personal details on TV, with her national ID. In a country where a mere picture of a woman wearing a traditional eastern attire can become 'revenge porn' to be used against her, Baloch's data leak put her at significant risk (Maher, 2019). She lost her anonymity, which often is essential to the safe use of the internet by women in conservative parts of the country, where even putting up their display picture on their social media can be dangerous for them. And this time, the media was the culprit.

After the Taliban's rapid ascent to power in the aftermath of the US withdrawal in Afghanistan, women - particularly activists and journalists - feared for their lives for being targeted by the Taliban regime. Many women rushed to wipe their social media presence in order to protect themselves (Stokel-Walker, 2021).

Many of these stories of disinformation are the same at their core, only changing form and severity depending on the context. A woman's personal information was used to inflict some kind of violence against her. It starts with data leak, is turned into disinformation, and eventually used to target the woman. Privacy International, an international charity that promotes the right to privacy, has said that data protection is "key" to fighting disinformation (Privacy International, 2021).

Gender-based violence is a perennial problem across the world, only made worse by the Covid-19 pandemic in what the UN called the "shadow pandemic" (UN Women, 2021). Women routinely face emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and deeply entrenched anti-women views only reinforce these ideas in policy, law enforcement, government and judiciary (Shah, 2021). These same challenges have been amplified on digital platforms, where these traditional power centres inflict some kind of violence against them.

It is therefore important to define gendered disinformation in the context of the Global South, and how it differs from most definitions by research in the Global North. Since this study is based on disinformation propagated by the media, relevant examples will be used and explained to construct a comprehensive and inclusive definition of gendered disinformation.

THE MEDIA, GENDER REPORTING AND DISINFORMATION

To understand gendered disinformation in recent years, it would be best to look at feminist movements and women political and social figures and how they are portrayed in media in the Gobal South. Women politicians continue to face misogyny by the media (Rasmussen & Abbas, 2017) and sexism on social media only adds to the disadvantages women in the public eye face (Oates, Gurevich, Walker, and Di Meco, 2019).

Demonstrations take place across the world to mark international women's day. Pinjra Tod movement in India has been subject to

Disinfo Lab notes that "large gatherings, events, and movements prove the object of gendered disinformation campaigns" with "backlash and slander, including in the form of well-planned and well-financed campaigns to harass WHRDs and cast doubt on the legitimacy of their work" (EU Disinfo Lab, 2021). Feminist movements have been subject to disinformation campaigns across the the world. These include the Aurat March, 'women's march' in Urdu, started in 2018 to mark international women's day in Pakistan. The Pinjra Tod movement started to protest against misogyny and discriminatory rules on college campuses whose activists have spent substantial times behind bars on false charges of instigating the Dehli riots (Pandey, 2021). Many journalists and members of the media posted tweets against the Aurat March on Twitter, calling it "anti-Islamic". It later transpired that the tweets contained false information and fake charges against the movement, leading many to remove their tweets (Khan, 2021). In addition, newspapers such as 'Ummat' called Aurat March organisers "whores" in a front-page story to stoke hatred against them (Samaa TV, 2021).

The International Media Support organisation, in its report titled "Digital misogyny: Why gendered disinformation undermines democracy", noted the case of Iranian journalist Yeganeh Rezaian who was convicted of espionage and was subject to a vicious disinformation campaign against her. The campaign took a markedly sexual and gendered form (Boberg, 2021). Similar campaigns can be seen in several countries in the Global South; it has been found that women journalists from Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Arab States are "'slut-shamed' by attackers seeking to cast doubt on the morals of women working in culturally and socially conservative societies... through the use of deepfakes to false narratives about extramarital affairs, and sexual orientation" (Posetti, Shabbir, Maynard, Bontcheva, Aboulez, 2021). In India, women politicians are frequently targeted by the social media machinery of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Weaponizing rape threats, gendered abuse and even sexually explicit deepfake videos, these trolls regularly conduct gender disinformation campaigns against women who speak out against the ruling party (Amnesty International India, 2020). This experience is echoed by women politicians in Eastern European countries as documented by Nina Jankowicz. Sexualized doctored images were employed to shame and silence Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk. Similar targeted campaigns were conducted in Georgia (Jankowicz, 2017)

The abuse directed towards women journalists includes doctored pictures of offensive and/or sexual nature, leaked personal information and accusations of being on the opposition parties' payrolls. Women journalists and activists in Pakistan are also accused of being anti-state and questions are raised regarding their professionalism (International Media Support, 2021). In the Philippines, disinformation campaigns against journalist Maria Ressa appear to be orchestrated which consisted of "credibility or reputation-based attacks frequently deployed disinformation tactics and abuse

conflating Ressa and her journalism with 'fake news'" (Posetti, Shabbir, Maynard, Bontcheva, Aboulez, 2021).

COUNTERING GENDERED DISINFORMATION PROPAGATED THROUGH MEDIA: INTERVIEWS

In 2018, Ebad Ahmed, a journalist based in Karachi, was doing his morning shift at the digital desk of Pakistan's biggest news media group, when he saw the group's TV channel running a dance video of a woman. In the video, a woman wearing a police uniform could be seen dancing in what was an indoors setting. The video was picked up from a social media platform (and Ahmed recalls that the officer was later suspended too). But on instinct, Ahmed went upstairs, where the TV team sat, and convinced them to stop airing the video. "As a journalist, I found it odd that a woman is being objectified. I thought to myself that perhaps such a video of a policeman would not be aired repeatedly like this," he told the author. Such 'gender-blind' reporting is commonplace in Pakistani media. News on violence against women or issues faced by them 'lose momentum' on TV and on online trends when political events involving men happen, a report says. "When gauging whether the language of reporting news is creating gender bias, 'the reporting language in six percent of the news stories was monitored to be biased.'" The report adds that "a majority of these biased reports were reported by men, while women journalists reported 32 percent of such stories" (Shah, 2021).

Such gender-blind reporting increased during the pandemic due to the removal of women journalists in newsrooms during the pandemic, the report adds. Women journalists have reported several instances of sexual harassment and intimidation within newsrooms, by sources or other traditional power players. Women journalists reported psychological abuse in the workplace after resisting sexual harassment, and getting lesser pay than male counterparts (Freedom Network Pakistan, 2017).

To explore whether journalists have an understanding of disinformation a questionnaire was given to journalists from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan and Quetta. The journalists were selected so that maximum viewpoints from these under-reported regions could be known, as news from urban centres is much easier to access. The questions asked are listed below. The answers have been edited for clarity and relevance.

- Is there a defined or at least a basic editorial policy with regards to covering Gender Based Violence (GBV) issues where you work?
- Is there formal or informal training given to reporters, producers and sub-editors on this?
- Is there any mechanism to fact-check stories that may be gender sensitive or could put a woman's life in danger?
- Is there an understanding of how misreporting can promote fake news or disinformation against women?
- Do you think more women in leadership and middle management positions would promote better reporting on GBV?

Hameeda is a citizen journalist in Quetta. She says that before posting or forwarding stories to relevant outlets, she takes 'all aspects' of a story and sources into account. She says she has attended gender-sensitive reporting and knows 20 more people who did. Responding to the question about disinformation, she said it is evident that social norms dictate how a gender story is received on the internet too. "A sensationalist news item that victim-blames or

makes accusations [against women], they [go] viral in no time." News items that propogate feminist or progressive ideas about women's rights and gender become a subject of criticism and ridicule, face united opposition by society and men, she says.

Shireen from Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) says that crimes against women are a culturally sensitive topic, and in GB, reporting mostly is done on 'softer', 'culture-related' topics. Editors, reflecting attitudes of society, try to bury stories regarding gender-based violence, especially those about women who commit suicide, because they do not want to bring a "bad name" to a particular area or a community. She states that stories reported as suicides are often murders of women on the basis of honour. Censorship within the media forces journalists to tell half truths and underplay the instances of gender-based violence in society. Overall, women's rights stories too have to be toned down so that they are "balanced" and include all parties' viewpoints. For this reason a lot of gender reporting is covered up or diluted.

Gender reporting about the GB region rarely makes it to the mainstream Urdu and English media, says Shireen. She added that there are only three to four women journalists in the entire GB region who do on-the-ground reporting, and negligible otherwise too. "Male journalists do not understand women's issues. I believe more women in senior roles would definitely mean more awareness, and reporting on unique problems faced by every area in GB." According to her, no training workshops on gender-sensitive reporting were held in Shireen's area in GB.

Zeenat from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's (KP) Peshawar says that there is no set policy or mandatory training for reporters and other newsroom staff to cover gender issues and "no or little space is given in the media to such issues." She says that there is only one woman reporter in Peshawar's bureaus of media houses, and negligible women reporters in newspapers. Media platforms are more interested in political and crime beat stories, she said. The task of fact-checking, a method that includes verifying from at least two sources, is left to reporters themselves. With no resources for fact-checking, reporters are left to their own devices when researching a news story. On the other hand, inaccurate reporting can result in termination of service, she says, with the reporter bearing the entire responsibility.

Significant care is taken about reporting on gender issues, as these issues are considered sensitive in KP, which like parts of GB, has largely a "tribal and conservative culture", says Zeenat. This means ensuring proper fact-checking and sometimes censoring details.

ANALYSIS: GENDER INFORMATION DISORDER AND THE MEDIA

Based on the primary research done for this paper and secondary sources, it can be concluded that disinformation persists not just on social media but in newsrooms as well both despite and inspite of editorial oversight. Interestingly, inaccurate reporting on cases considered 'sensitive', particularly gender-based violence, was found to be in the form of intentional editing of data to rob it of context and objectivity.

Furthermore, in some newsrooms it would be safe to say that gendered disinformation is more about under-reporting or editing out information for cultural sensitivities and/or lack of resources and staff with relevant capabilities. While in other cases, lack of resources and overworked reporters ended up reporting disinformation to meet the demands of the rapidly changing news cycle. State crackdowns on the media have led to many outlets 'towing the line' in order to survive under repressive environments.

There is also a stark disparity in terms of resources and access when it comes to the Global North and South. Independent fact-checking organizations and desks within news organisations are common in the Global North, but hardly found in Global South countries. Lack of internet access in underdeveloped areas means that news organizations in these areas are unable to access the same resources as well commented areas (Ragnedda & Gladkova, 2020). Furthermore in areas where internet shutdowns are frequent, access to the news is limited allowing for disinformation to proliferate. Internet shutdowns disproportionately take place in Global South countries. According to AccessNow, out of the 29 countries that shutdown the internet in 2020, 10 were from Africa, 8 from the MENA region, 6 in Asia Pacific, 3 from Latin America and the Caribbean, and only 2 were from Europe (Access Now, 2021).

Furthermore lack of gender representation of women and gender minorities in newsrooms leads to explicit and latent biases making it into stories. It is important to note, however, that mere representation does not automatically result in better reporting and fact-checking, particularly if those providing representation are denied decision-making power.

Lastly, some media organizations intentionally propagate disinformation. Urdu newspapers and certain television channels actively propagate disinformation, as was mentioned above in the Ummat newspaper example. In India, women are denied their fair share at major media organisations, according to a UN report on gender and media. Only 26.3% of senior most roles were occupied by women at online outlets, and numbers for other media platforms are relatively low as well. "Women are often assigned to cover 'soft beats; such as lifestyle and fashion, while men predominate in the 'hard beats' of politics, economy, and sports," it said (UN Women & Media Rumble).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Definitional Diversity:** It is essential that in the Global South, the definition of gendered disinformation takes into account the local culture, media consumption and internet trends.

- **Inclusive Definition:** Definitions of gendered disinformation need to be agreed upon after discussions with different stakeholders, including those impacted in the Global South.

- **Gender Media Ethics:** Development of basic guidelines and checks for the media need to be developed to set the minimum standard for reporting and publication specifically keeping in mind gendered disinformation; which can include misogynistic news reports, revealing sexual assault victims' identities, disclosure of personal details of a gender or sexual minorities, use of gender stereotypes, etc.

- **Stringent Gender Disinformation Editorial Policy:** Media houses should have in place editorial policies to cover gender issues, mandatory training for sub-editors, reporters, art and graphics teams.

- **Redistribution of Resources:** Given the meagre resources at the disposal of media organisations and journalists in most Global South countries, programs to build their capacity and provide resources should be a shared responsibility of the global community. Concrete action points on addressing gender disinformation need to be placed on the agenda of global bodies working on freedom of expression, media freedoms and access to information.

- **Greater Gender Representation:** Objective, inclusive reporting is impossible without encouraging a more gender diverse workforce in newsrooms. Media houses should identify issues with employing and retaining female workforce, and make efforts for their safety, security and create opportunities for their career promotion.

- **Resources for Fact-checking:** Media houses should be required to hire dedicated fact-checkers/disinformation reporters and invest in investigative reporting on gender, which goes beyond routine reporting and editorials.

- **Limited State Intervention:** Given the history of speech restrictive regulation in the Global South, governments should refrain from creating laws and policies which centralise power to regulate the media and determine what constitutes accurate or inaccurate information.

- **More resources for content moderation by social media companies in the Global South:** As revealed by the leaked 'Facebook papers', resources for content moderation directed towards the 'rest of the world' constituted a mere 13% as compared to the United States (Elliott et al., 2021). This stark disparity is mostly felt in the Global South where disinformation in local languages is often not detected by both human moderators and algorithms.

- **Accountability for States:** As discussed earlier, governments often engage in disinformation campaigns. Checks and balances should be in place to ensure accountability and consequences for targeted disinformation attacks on journalists and media houses.

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THE ROOTS OF GENDERED DISINFORMATION: A HISTORICAL CASE STUDY

DOCTORING 101
ISLAMIC STATE OF PAKISTAN
1970
CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN
LALARUKH / WOMEN'S ACTION FORUM
میری مرضی
میرا جسم
ہم کیا چاہتے ہیں؟ Azaadi
پدرشاہی پاش پاش
TIMES UP
عورت آزادی مارچ 2020
#METOO
REPORTING LIVE

INTRODUCTION

They marched in the streets for the rights of women, protesting against a patriarchal system. Some ran for political office, in order to change the system from within. In return, their opponents would denounce them as being 'anti-state', 'foreign agents', and charge them with tags of being 'anti-religion', in order to sway public opinion and pressure them into silence. These accusations are ones that Pakistani women's rights activists of today and their allies are only too familiar with. Organizers of, and participants in the contemporary feminist movement such as the Aurat March held on March 8, 2021,[1] found themselves in danger, owning to the consequences that arise from sensationalist and trumped-up accusations of blasphemy[2] (a capital offence in Pakistan), after wilful misinterpretations – and electronic doctoring – of slogans and placards.

The focus here is not solely 2020 or 2021, however: these are accusations that have been thrown at generations of women's rights activists and allies in Pakistan since the early days of the nation's creation, up to the present day.

When or if gendered disinformation is discussed in the current light of day, there is a tendency, particularly through the lens of a patriarchal system, to treat it as suddenly emerging ex nihilo. The reality, however, is that gendered disinformation as a political weapon enjoys a historical pedigree not just in the Global North, but in the Global South, particularly in Pakistan. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

The world order that emerged after the Second World War permitted the United States of America and its allies to commit to a decades-long period of political tension against the Soviet Union and its allies with ongoing global ramifications. This order would also result in the leadership of nations aligned with the US – by choice or otherwise – essentially given free reign to actively suppress what they viewed as dissent, so long as it appeared to serve US economic or political interests. As a Cold War ally of the US, successive governments in Pakistan, whether military or civilian, cracked down on activist movements, falsely accusing them of being 'anti-state' or backed by foreign elements, with little to no overt pressure from the US et al. The 1970s and 80s would see women's rights activists physically attacked when protesting and demonstrating for equality, with photographs and first-hand accounts by activists – many of whom are now between their 60s or 80s at the time of this paper – forming an indelible part of Pakistan history. Even with the end of the Cold War, and with strategic geopolitical realignments at play, the Pakistani state and allied actors continue to utilize gendered disinformation against newer generations of activists, as a form of patriarchal muscle memory.

There are parallels between the past and the present when it comes to gendered disinformation in Pakistan: this paper will look at the historical context from which gendered disinformation in Pakistan arose, and the ripples through history that can be felt today.

Indeed, the past bears responsibility for setting the scene in terms of the rhetoric and narratives utilized against the then-teenage socialist activist for girl's education, Malala Yousafzai, in the wake of her attempted assassination by the Taliban in 2012. As we will also see in this paper, though her attack resulted in widespread condemnation of the act, it also saw conspiracy theories and claims of being "anti-state" or a "foreign agent" being weaponized against her online, along with claims of being used as a pawn by foreign women rights movements, with real world consequences. Arguably, what happened (and continues to happen) to her could be said to have become a precursor to the campaigns levied against Aurat March and organizations in Pakistan whose work focuses on, or is related to, gendered rights.

WOMEN IN THE INDIAN AND PAKISTAN INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENTS

The fight for the rights and equality in what eventually became Pakistan has its roots in India in the 1800s, under the British Raj. As Dr. Rubina Saigol writes in *Feminism and the Women's Movement in Pakistan: Actors, Debates and Strategies,*

> *"The British dual policy of ushering in modernity and reinforcing tradition was evident in the realm of law. By 1790, the system of law in India was anglicized but Personal Laws of each of the religions of India were retained and continued to govern relations between men and women. Customary and religious law that subordinated women was left untouched. The British law in fact deprived women of their right to inheritance recognized even in religious law. Nonetheless, the Muslim Personal Law of 1937 recognized the right of Muslim women to inherit property, with the exception of agricultural land due to an understanding reached between the large landowners in the Punjab and the British administration. The public/private divide was thus maintained and strengthened."* [3]

Saigol also writes that,

> *"The Muslims of India were caught between the desire to retain a sense of continuity with the past and tradition, while simultaneously acquiring modern knowledge in order to compete in the re-ordered world of politics, commerce and the economy. The contradictory imperatives of preservation of the old order, while stepping reluctantly into the new one, were reconciled by a strict public/private division in which women would guard the symbolic frontiers of identity by maintaining tradition and culture, and the men would enter the fields of politics and commerce where transactions occurred with the colonial state and competing religious communities."* [4]

This duality would affect the direction of the struggle for and recognition of the women's rights movement in British Raj India and the subsequent post-Independence South Asian landscape, as well as highlight the tensions and opposing forces working to curtail the rights and status of women.

Though there were pushes to promote the right to education of women in pre-Independence India, for instance, often the people or groups did so as women were "seen as the repositories of cultural and traditional values, their education was justified within the framework of Islam",[5] "Such agendas are ultimately conservative and merely created spaces for women's participation", notes Saigol, "which led gradually to an awareness of their own rights as women. " [6]

As Saigol also notes,

"While pan-Islamist religious and nationalist movements provided the impetus for women's education and led to the early consciousness of rights, such movements were also conservative and patriarchal. Both religion and nationalism tend to define women in traditional ways believing them to be the repositories of tradition, culture and custom. Syed Ahmad Khan was staunchly opposed to women's education wanting only Muslim males of the Ashrafiya educated in order to compete with Hindus in the arena of politics and commerce. When he realized that women's education was inevitable, he proposed to control the content so that it would not deviate from religious instruction and household functions. Similarly, Nazeer Ahmad, while upholding an education in secular subjects, also emphasized women's education toward making them dutiful wives and good Muslim women." [7]

Even with the patriarchal chauvinism that ran through the aforementioned pan-Islamic and nationalist movements that Indian Muslims took up being ever present, however, women played major and pivotal roles in the nascent Indian independence and Pakistan movements of the early twentieth century. The 1930s and 40s, in particular, saw women heavily involved with the Pakistan movement, to the extent that a women's central subcommittee of the Muslim League (then known as the All-India Muslim League) was established in 1938, and the subcommittee's first meeting being held in 1940. 1940 also saw "an unprecedented number of women"[8] taking part in the Muslim League's famous 'Lahore Session' in March of that year – also known as the session where the 'Lahore Resolution' was formally adopted by the League, calling for the creation of independence states, namely Pakistan. It was also the first time that women would take to the streets to protest, "clad in burqas".[9]

Rather than supporting the women protestors who had come out in defense of Muslim League leadership who had been arrested, however, newspapers at the time condemned them as "shameless women who would usher in the downfall of Muslims".[10] Though this did not discourage women from protesting – and indeed there would be more protests later that year, which would see women arrested for the first time in South Asia – it does provide an indication of the direction and manner of one form of gendered disinformation that would take root in this region of the world i.e. that the actions of women fighting for rights would somehow directly or indirectly "sabotage" Islam.

Saigol, drawing on the work of Khawar Mumtaz and Farida Shaheed, also observes that:

"Participation in the nationalist struggle led to an awareness of their oppression and rights as women. They had won the right to education, to vote and to own property in the course of the nationalist struggle. They became aware of their ability to mobilize, organize and provide services in crisis situations…They could cast off the veil, talk to strangers, enter politics, take out processions, shout slogans, hoist flags and face police brutality. The national struggle made it possible to transgress traditional boundaries, an act which otherwise would receive disapprobation." [11]

The "disapprobation" Saigol refers to would nonetheless be found to be pervasive shortly after the formal creation of Pakistan – the latter of which owed a great deal to women – and there were measures taken to diminish their active involvement in the development of the then-new nation. As Ayesha Khan writes in *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy,*

"They have been relegated to the peripheries of citizenship, through state-sponsored exclusion from the public sphere and decision-making structures, both formal and informal. Military rule, by its very nature, excludes women from participating in decision-making, but democracy is a mode of governance that is premised upon inclusion. Hence, as Shaheed argues, democracy, flawed as it is, remains a critical factor for gender equality and women's inclusion in Pakistan." [12]

What progress had been hoped and fought for in the early days of Pakistan would come up against the religious clergy in Pakistan, who would push back against any legislative measures that they perceived to be "western and antithetical to religion and culture." [13]

AFTER 1947

In 1948, Ra'ana Liaquat Ali, First Lady of Pakistan, and the wife of Pakistan's first Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, had established the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) which "administered first aid to women, organized food distribution, dealt with health problems and epidemics, collected clothing for the needy, and provided emotional and moral support. The relief and welfare work was widely accepted as it was seen as an extension of the nurturing role that women were traditionally expected to perform."[14] The success of the WVS, and the massive interest shown by women in its work, led to the formation of the All-Pakistan Women's Association, or the APWA.

According to Saigol,

"APWA was a voluntary non-political organization open to all women over sixteen years of age irrespective of class, caste, color [sic] or creed. The objectives were to be a welfare organization for Pakistani women. It focused on creating educational, social and cultural consciousness and improving the economic participation of women for national development. Urban women from well to do classes joined and it became an acceptable avenue for women's activities outside the home. APWA opened girls' schools, health centers [sic] and industrial homes, and imparted sewing and related skills for income- generation. Most of its activities were concentrated in Karachi, Lahore and Peshawar with district and divisional headquarters in other parts of the country." [15]

THE MFLO, APWA AND AYUB KHAN

Saigol notes that at this time APWA appeared to have a relationship with the Pakistani government that was based on "mutual accommodation and co-operation", and was regarded as "non-threatening" to the state, due to its focus on "welfare and development", which allowed it to receive funding from the state.[16] When APWA decided to get involved with national politics in the 1950s, therefore, the organization must have not believed that it would face hostility, especially as it pushed for change in a "predominantly non-political and welfare approach" – as it did in 1953, when it recommended that the National and Provincial Assemblies set aside and allocate or reserve ten seats for women. What happened next? According to Saigol,

> "APWA was not approved by religious clerics who chastised Raana [sic] Liaquat and others for not wearing the veil. The Majlis-e-Ahrar, a right wing orthodox party, labeled them prostitutes. The Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat-ul-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) also looked upon them with disapproval, despite having opposed the very formation of Pakistan."

This would not be the last time that APWA and its leadership would be attacked by Pakistani clerics who were wielding power. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) of 1961, "gave women a few rights with regard to marriage, the custody of children, divorce and registration of marriages and divorces...it was basically an attempt to discourage polygamy as the first wife's written permission became necessary for a husband's second marriage."[17] Though General Ayub Khan came to power in 1958 after overthrowing the civilian government of President Iskander Mirza in a military coup, APWA's relationship with the military leader continued and appeared to be as non-threatening and mutually beneficial as before. Thus, the passage of the MFLO would not, on the face of it, appear be cause for conflict, particularly as similar laws had been passed in other Muslim nations such as Tunisia at that time.

Milquetoast as the MFLO was, the conservative ulema (Islamic religious scholars) loudly condemned it and its supporters – namely the APWA – as "tampering" with the Qur'an. In response, "women retaliated by launching a movement in support of the Family Laws Ordinance, and in Lahore Begum Nasim Jahan led a march against the clerics which ended with the burning of the effigy of Maulana Abbas Ali Khan, a virulent opponent, in front of the Punjab Assembly."

Ayub Khan, the military leader of the country with whom the APWA believed they had cordial relations, nonetheless would align himself with the hardline ulema politically. As Ayesha Khan notes, that there were Cold War alliances taken up by Pakistan's leadership that would, in time, come to pervade and influence the political and social direction the country would take, impacting the rights and status of women for decades to come:

> *"In retrospect, however, there were already friendships and alliances forged in the 1950s that were to haunt Pakistan for decades. Ayub Khan had international support, that is, the United States considered it a friendly government to its Cold War interests, and for the same reasons it also funded the growth of the right-wing Jamaat-i-Islami, an urban-based religious political organisation active in the universities in opposition to left-wing student groups. It was the Jamaat and similar groups that were to promote highly patriarchal interpretations of Islam and become close allies of the next military dictator of Pakistan, General Zia ul-Haq. He, too, became a close ally of the US, this time in support of the Afghan resistance to Soviet occupation."* [18]

The "international support" in question would inevitably entail the leadership in particular aligned nations being given free rein to actively suppress what they viewed as dissent, so long as it appeared to serve US economic or political interests. It was thus in the interest of political and military leadership in nations such as Pakistan to quell dissent, wherever it came from, by violence or by disinformation.

FATIMA JINNAH, AMERICAN AGENT?

This was made particularly clear in the run-up to the 1965 Presidential Elections, with General Ayub Khan running against Fatima Jinnah, sister to Mohammad Ali Jinnah – the founder of Pakistan – and candidate for the Combined Opposition Party of Pakistan (COPP). Ms. Jinnah would repeatedly condemn Khan's governance, asserting that, "You can't have stability through compulsion, force and the big stick." [19]

Jinnah's standing for the presidency resulted in Ayub Khan using the ulema to declare in 1965 that a woman could not be the head of state of a Muslim country.[20] Further to this, and darkly amusing given his own alliance with the US, and Pakistan's reliance on economic and political aid, Khan would accuse Jinnah of being an agent of the US and Indian governments, in response to statements by Ms. Jinnah that he was "unable to restrain the U.S. from helping Pakistan's No. 1 adversary, India".[21] Interestingly, the hardline Jamaat-i-Islami, would support Ms. Jinnah in the election, in order to unseat Ayub Khan (Saigol, 2016). Fatima Jinnah would lose the 1965 election to Ayub Khan, due to his winning of the Electoral College system in place, but it would be marred by controversy.

Ayub Khan's accusation towards Ms. Jinnah – that she was an "agent" of a foreign government – may be familiar to rights activists and progressive politicians in Pakistan today, but the report by Time Magazine in 1964 marks the earliest example of this form of gendered disinformation – that is to say, a non-religious one – being used against someone the state apparatus considers a political opponent.

THE 1970S

The 1970s saw the creation of more openly political women's rights organizations that not only worked in areas of welfare in the manner of APWA, but also worked to develop "consciousness raising" activities, to increase awareness of the class struggle and the patriarchy.[22]

In spite of growing political awareness on the part of organizations, however, and the gradual incorporation of working-class, middle-class, and rural activists, Ayesha Khan argues that women's organizations remained relatively cordial with successive governments, including the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto presidency, until the latter's overthrow by the hardline military leader General Zia ul-Haq in 1977, followed by Bhutto's execution in 1979, even with the initial stages of the women's rights movement essentially "'activism in opposition to an adversarial state'", quoting Farida Shaheed:

> *"Similarly, they failed to question or resist the Islamist provisions of the 1973 constitution, the lesser status of non-Muslim citizens, the declaration of Islam as the state religion, and the forcing out of Ahmadis from the pale of Islam in 1974. These steps and other measures, such as the banning of alcohol and gambling, the declaration of Friday as the weekly holiday, all done to appease the religious lobby, set the stage for the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) movement against Bhutto which culminated with military takeover and aggressive Islamization."* [23]

Zia ul-Haq's rule would see a harsh "Islamification" program undertaken to ensure that Pakistani institutions would adhere to a dual:

> *"Jamaat-e-Islami and Saudi Arabian articulation of Islam. Radical changes were made in the school curricula, educational policies, the media and the judiciary to strengthen the tenuous Islamic credentials of the regime. Harsh punishments, such as flogging and stoning to death, were borrowed from the Saudi model and journalists as well as lawyers were not spared in the drive to 'cleanse' society of all the evils of socialism that Bhutto had propagated. Only the economy was exempted from so-called Islamization as it was based on an international fiscal system in which interest had to be paid. However, Zakat, Ushr and Islamic banking forms were introduced to justify the resort to religion."* [24]

As Khan and Saigol both point out, this program was not aimed solely at the "public" sphere, but the private one as well, with an inevitable focus placed on upon women, who were *"seen as the repositories of culture, religion and tradition. The veil and the four walls were emphasized, piety in dress codes was imposed by vigilantes operating in the public sphere, and violence was used to ensure compliance with official measures"* (Saigol, 2016). A series of laws were passed that attacked the status and participation of women, such as:

> *"...the Hudood Ordinance of 1979, the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance and the Law of Evidence of 1984 were promulgated. The Qisas and Diyat law privatized the crime of murder and saved the perpetrators of 'honor killing'. The Law of Evidence reduced women's testimony in a court of law to half that of men. In 1983, the Ansari Report of the Council of Islamic Ideology recommended that women's participation in politics should be limited to nominated women over the age of fifty. In 1985, the Shariat Bill (9th Amendment) threatened to abolish the Family Laws Ordinance of 1961."* [25]

Witnessing with the horror the reversion of the status and rights women, negating the gradual progress made both pre and post 1947, activists would take to the streets to protest the aforementioned legislation, and to ensure their rights were not eroded further. In 1983 several members of the nascent Women Action Forum (WAF) – founded in 1981, but had already attracted many women to its ranks – marched alongside the Punjab Women Lawyer's Association to protest and present a petition against the aforementioned "Law of Evidence" – also known as Qanun-e-Shahadat in Urdu – with over three hundred women in taking part, and "almost twice the number of police officers to meet them."[26] Several women were physically attacked by the police officers in question, with several women being arrested. The day of the march and the assault on the marchers by the police, February 12, 1983, now known as Pakistan's National Women's Day.[27]

The march, despite heavy censorship, made its way into English-language newspapers in Pakistan, and was eventually reported on by the BBC World Service, ensuring greater awareness.

Zia ul-Haq's government, however, was unsurprisingly displeased with the attention, and religious members of the Pakistani Federal Council – or Majlis-e-Shoora – accused the march of being "instigated by elements who were opposed to the setting up of an Islamic order" and that "these women are opposed to Nizam-i-Islam!" which was applauded by other religious clerics, in response to female lawmakers attempting to get motions passed to condemn the violence carried out against the marchers.[28]

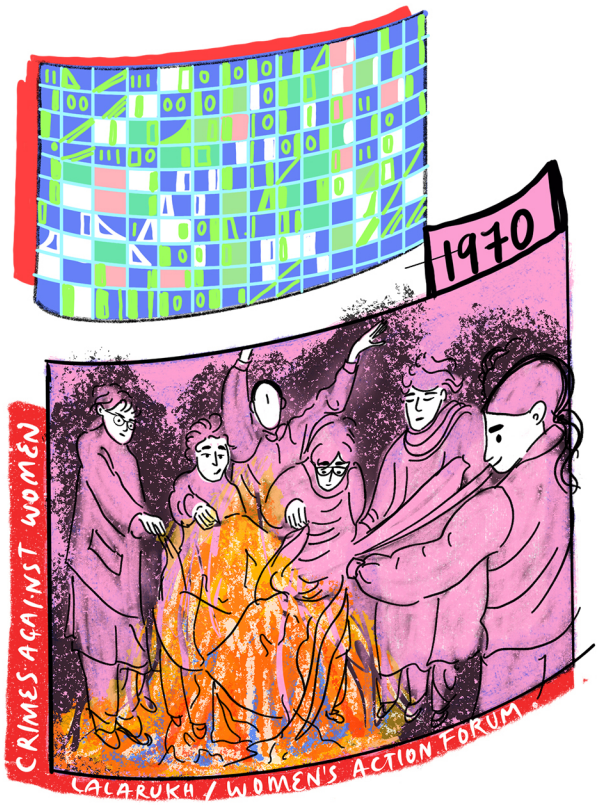
WAR AGAINST FEMINISM

Despite relatively progressive news outlets such as Dawn covering the march and its aftermath, as well as the BBC, the government used outlets that were under its control or influence to report and widely disseminate disinformation against the protest. The Pakistani Times, a one-time progressive newspaper that became a government organ after pressure by Zia ul-Haq, wrote that "'renowned ulema... have described women's protest against the Law of Evidence as a proclamation of war against God's commands."[29] By framing the protest march as sacrilegious and anti-Islam, reinforced by items in English and Urdu news outlets in Pakistan, ensured that a debate about the nuances and implementation as to what constitutes Islamic law, was rendered impossible. The language used in service of the demonization of women's rights and their allies also led to a form of chilling effect, with even discussion of the impacts of the laws passed by Zia ul-Haq possibly having negative consequences. Ayesha Khan writes about how Asma Jahangir, the celebrated human rights lawyer and activist, was in danger of being expelled by the Pakistani bar association after she had presented a paper on the laws in India, as the association "thought by speaking against the laws she had spoken against Islam".[30] In 1986, Asma Jahangir would be accused of blasphemy by a female member of Jamaat-e-Islami, Nasir Fatima, for the former's opposition to Zia ul-Haq's proposed amendment to make "Shariah the supreme law of Pakistan" (Khan, 2020). "Nisar Fatima further accused Asma of trying to bribe the press to retract its reporting on the controversial seminar", according to Khan, "and of being a non-Muslim herself."

A paid advertisement by the Committee to Repeal the Hudood Ordinance had been published by both Dawn and Jang, but after apparent government pressure and protests by religious clerics, Jang retracted the advertisement, and promised "action

against the culprits" responsible for the advertisement.

There continue to be parallels between news coverage of women's rights movements in the 1980s and the present day, as highlighted by the Urdu-language Ummat newspaper. The newspaper came under fire for its April 5, 2021 edition that referred to "Aurat March's whores" and inferring that participants were ignoring sexual assault against women in other countries.[31]



THE 1990S AND EARLY 2000S

The death of Zia ul-Haq in a plane crash in 1988 did not lead to a reversion of his government's policies, which were taken up by the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif and the Islami Jamhoori Ittehad, a religious right wing coalition financed by the Inter-Services Intelligence agency.[32] The Sharif government took aim at women's rights organizations, accusing them in the Pakistani press of "following a western and anti-Muslim agenda by advocating women's rights and criticizing Islamic legislation." The provincial government of the Punjab, then run by Shahbaz Sharif (brother of Nawaz), went further, blaming specific women's rights organizations – the Ajoka Theatre group, Shirkat Gah and the Institute of Women's Studies Lahore – for a "lack of patriotism", "financial corruption", not highlighting the plight of Kashmiri women enough in their work, and, bizarrely, "indulging in lesbian behaviour behind closed doors." [33]

THE CASE OF MUKHTAR MAI

(Trigger Warning: discussion of sexual assault)

Victims of sexual assault are not spared for being attacked with gendered disinformation either, sadly. In 2002 Mukhtar Mai was gang-raped as per the sanction of the *jirga* or Tribal Council in the Muzaffargarh district of the province of Punjab, as part of an "honor revenge" in response to a dispute between two clans in the region, and made to walk naked through her village afterwards.[34] Speaking up about her assault in public saw her receive international and national media attention, and her case was revisited. When invited to speak overseas by Amnesty International in 2005, however, Mukhtar Mai was found to be on Pakistan's list of people forbidden from leaving the country, the Exit Control List, on the orders of then-President General Pervez Musharraf, "fearing that she (Mai) might malign Pakistan's image."[35] Mukhtar Mai's passport was also confiscated for the same reason. Musharraf had also reportedly remarked that "Mai was being taken to the US by foreign nongovernmental organizations 'to bad-mouth Pakistan' over the 'terrible state' of the nation's women. He said NGOs are 'Westernized fringe elements' which are 'as bad as the Islamic extremists'." [36]

THE ATTACK ON MALALA, AND THE AFTERMATH

On October 9, 2012, the young Pakistani socialist and activist for girls' education, Malala Yousafzai, was shot in the head by a member of the Pakistani Taliban as she was leaving school, in an assassination attempt in response to her activism. Flown to the United Kingdom to treat her injury, she survived and currently lives outside of Pakistan, and continues to advocate for peace and for the right to education for girls in Pakistan. She received the Nobel Peace Prize, and graduated last year from the University of Oxford. Though Ms. Yousafzai has received and continues to receive awards and positive media and political attention both at home and abroad, she has also been the victim of disinformation within Pakistan.

Shortly after her recovery from her attack, conspiracy theorists asserted that Ms. Yousafzai was not only not representative of Pakistan, but that she was an agent of the CIA or Israel, and that her own attack was a "false flag operation" at the hands of the CIA.[37]

Assed Baig, a freelance journalist, and supporter of Ms. Yousafzai's cause, nonetheless called her "...the good native, she does not criticize the West, she does not talk about the drone strikes, she is the perfect candidate for the white man to relieve his burden and save the native," in a piece for the Huffington Post in 2013.[38]

It should be pointed out that in his essay Baig condemned her attack, and was at pains to stress how he agreed with her general stance. The sentiment that she is or was a pawn of the West is, however, at the heart of the continuing informal campaign of gendered disinformation that is targeted at her, just as it was targeted at women activists for decades in Pakistan. Baig's assertion that she "does not talk about drone strikes", for instance, was and continues to be a disinformation talking point in regards to Malala Yousafzai, even after she would go on the record and condemn drone attacks[39] when meeting with then-US President Barak Obama, in the same month that Baig's essay was published.[40] A network of schools in Pakistan, The All Pakistan Private Schools Federation (APPSF), refused to teach her book, "I Am Malala", claiming that it contained anti-Islam and anti-Pakistan material.[41] Malala Yousafzai's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 did not result in an abatement of the disinformation directed towards her – the widespread dissemination of false narratives resulted in very subdued celebrations in Pakistan of her Nobel win, with little coverage on local news channels.[42]

One of the goals of gendered disinformation is to ensure that women activists or indeed anyone aiming to change the political status quo will be forced into silence, and that necessary debates and coverage on

sociopolitical matters do not reach the light of day, as observed with the Law of Evidence in the 1980s, or any present day attempts to discuss or revisit blasphemy legislation in Pakistan. As Syed Irfan Ashraf, a columnist with Dawn, remarked in an interview, "people want to see things in black and white. They want to believe the western people want to get hold of this region, the resources, that they are behind the militancy and terrorism[43]," which gendered disinformation both propagates and is sustained by.

The historical context of the construction of narratives that frame feminists and their allies as non-state actors in the pay of foreign entities, highlights that state and state-aligned actors have long fought to paint those working for change as 'unpatriotic', and 'against Islam'. It is a reminder that up-setting the gender, race and class status quo by bringing attention to toxic patriarchal norms, is part of the near eternal struggle for the soul and humanity of Pakistan, and that the defenders and enablers of inequality and toxicity will fight tooth and nail just as hard as those fighting to live and work in the early days of a better nation.

CONCLUSION: A GLOBAL SOUTH CONTEXT

Disinformation may be weaponized against a particular minority group because they may be viewed as the 'other' as opposed to 'mainstream' groups, and thus a more 'permissible' target. Given the systemic dehumanization of these groups through techniques such as disinformation, public solidarity is sometimes slow in occurring. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out in the contemporary #MeToo context, women and marginalized groups are already seen as suspect subjects in the eyes of the public and any 'truth-telling' exercise is framed within existing power structures where the truth-tellers are already those who have amassed some level of privilege.[44] Backlash against feminist discourse that manifests both online and offline for Banet-Weiser, in what she terms "popular misogyny", can be seen in reactionary terms that in response to the belief that "masculinity, and more generally, patriarchy, are under threat".[45] While popular misogyny and backlash manifests itself in the form of male injury and belief that their rights are being taken away—as part of an entitlement that comes with patriarchy—the backlash to mainstream feminism manifests itself in very different ways in a Global South context. Feminist movements are routinely subject to both backlash as well as concerted action by state and non-state disinformation actors who play on pre-existing biases against women and gender minorities to discredit them.

Gendered disinformation campaigns that were utilized or continued to be utilized after decolonization across the Global South found life in the Cold War, wherein, as discussed earlier, governments (civilian and military) of client states aligned with the United States were permitted to effectively crack down on protest movements, in order to fulfil dangerously nebulous "anti-communist" commitments in return for financial, political and military aid.

Accusations of “foreign funding” et al were not aimed solely at women’s rights activists, but at activists protesting censorship and abuses of the state in general – which still continues. Backlash against feminist movements can be seen, thus, across time and history. It is seen in the demonization of feminism in South Korea,[46] and in backlash against feminist gains on gender and sexualities in Latin American countries such as Colombia, Brazil and Costa Rica.[47]

The language and rhetoric has the same rhythm and cadence as that of attacks and smear campaigns levelled to women activists in the 80s, 70s, and 60s, if not earlier, as we have seen. Examining the historical overview of the context in which gendered disinformation arises and is carried out, therefore, particularly in regards to movements within or aligned with the Global South, is necessary, help in identifying and recognizing patterns of disinformation, so that activists are able to fight back more effectively.

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GOSSIP AND RUMOR MONGERING: ANALYSING CASUAL DISINFORMATION FROM GENDERED LENS

THE WALLS HAVE VERY BIG EYES, THE DOORS ALSO HAVE EYES
THE INTERNET HAS EYES AND EARS
Victim Blaming
gender disinformation
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AS A SUBSET OF ONLINE GENDER ABUSE
OFTEN USING FALSE NARRATIVES AGAINST WOMEN
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HAYIIIIIIIIII
EXPOSED AS AWARA AND BADCHALAN
GOSSIP IS A PART OF EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS
OFTEN ATTRIBUTED TO WOMEN GOSSIP
IS CONSIDERED SPITEFUL RUMOUR TO MALIGN SOMEONE'S REPUTATIO
WEAPON USING WOMEN'S BODIES TO TARGET/INVALIDATE THEM
DISINFORMATION AS A VIOLENT TOOL TO NOT JUST ATTACK WOMEN AND GENDERED INDIVIDUALS BUT ALSO TO ATTACK YOUNG PEOPLE USING THE INTERNET
WOMEN JOURNALISTS' CHARACTERS AND MORALITY ARE JUDGED OVER THEIR PROFESS
SHAYLA'S DOTTAH IS SO SLUTTY DONT LIST EN TO

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly digital world, where the opportunities are endless, it is no surprise that risks and threats to physical and digital safety have become part and parcel of the deal. Over the years, there is increasing consensus among various bodies around the world, working to make the internet a safer and inclusive space for everyone, that digital threats either have offline origins or result in some form of off-the-net adverse impact.

For this paper, the goal is to differentiate between online violence and gendered online violence using the gendered disinformation framework, and creating language for recognizing rumors and disinformation targeted towards gendered bodies as a form of violence and abuse. 'Fake news', false information, misinformation, disinformation, misleading information, rumors and gossip are all terms used to dissect how misleading information against women and gender minorities on the internet to posit that gendered disinformation is in fact a category of online gender-based violence and abuse. This paper will also examine how attitudes towards seemingly innocuous gossip and rumors have real-world impact and promote misinformation in the online world, making them gendered disinformation with real life negative impact on the victim.

DEFINING DISINFORMATION

There is no one universally accepted definition of disinformation and many have argued for reforming existing ones. Disinformation is described by the European Union as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm".[1]

The debate surrounding online disinformation seems restricted to fake news and 'propaganda' against governments, [2] or to discredit people in powerful political positions.[3] It has also been analyzed in the case of disinformation campaigns against activists and journalists[4] to intimidate or defame them due to their work. Due to this, the definition of disinformation, such as the one adopted by the EU, would focus on very public deception and harm, making it difficult to apply to situations which involve individuals and attacks that take place within relatively private settings such as closed online communities.

This policy paper weeks to analyze the impact of disinformation on regular internet users that may be subjected to a disinformation campaign by within their communities, friends, colleagues, ex-partners or even family members. The aim of these campaigns is similar to that of political ones, damaging the reputation of their target. The paper posits that it is difficult to apply existing definitions of disinformation that do not take into account micro-level issues such as personal harm suffered by the victim, mental trauma, conflict and violence within the family, or ostracization from society.

A broader description of disinformation can help achieve this gap. While there is overlap between these practices and defamation, a harm that is recognized by the legal system in most countries, defamation laws seek to privatize and individualize the impact. Laws on defamation and slander aim to reprimand those who are directly or indirectly involved in the dissemination of the incorrect information, and would usually involve an ascertainable number of perpetrators. Gendered disinformation, on the other hand, that occurs on a more organized and large-scale on the internet, becomes almost impossible to track down a single or group of persons who can be held responsible. Therefore, the last section of this paper argues for laws that aim to protect the victim from any further effects of the false and damaging information.

A definition of disinformation from a gendered perspective allow it take into account the vulnerability of less powerful and marginalized sections of the society that already struggle to assert their space online,

and such disinformation may lead to additional harms that threaten their safety online and offline. The definition can be expanded to include a wide array of practices to manipulate information and narratives. For instance, online posts containing correct information couched in a false or manipulated context, or supplemented through exaggerated, additional commentary such as captions and accompanying messages, give a false impression to deliberately harm or damage reputation. While not false per se, they are disinformation in effect. As discussed later in this paper, disinformation targeting women uses language with misogynistic undertones to insult the victim, with an aim to spread rumors about them and/or their character.

EXPLAINING GOSSIP AND RUMORS AS MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

GOSSIP

Gossip is part of everyday conversations, with people talking about others in the natural course of conversations. Often attributed to women, gossip can also consist of spiteful rumors to malign someone's reputation.[5] Oxford dictionary says that Gossip is "informal talk or stories about other people's private lives, that may be unkind or not true." While there is no statistical or scientific evidence that would suggest who gossips more and its nature, but research suggests that gossip is not necessarily negative in nature. In fact, a 2019 study[6] noted that most gossip is neutral, with only 15% of gossip being negative and 9% considered positive, indicating that 76% gossip amongst the 467 subjects that were surveyed was neutral.[7]

Another 2004 paper[8] published in Review of General Psychology argues that gossip is a form of cultural learning. It states, "Gossip is a potentially powerful and efficient means of transmitting information about the rules, norms, and other guidelines for living in a culture. On the surface, gossip consists of stories and anecdotes about particular other people, perhaps especially ones that reflect negatively on the target. We readily concede that some of the appeal of gossip is simply learning about other people. However, we think that a second, less obvious function of gossip is to convey information about social norms and other guidelines for behavior."[9]

Historically, gossiping was seen as a bonding activity amongst friends and family, and to make new social connections. But over time, women were demonized for talking in private, partly because of the friendships they formed as a result. Silvia Federici, an American academic, says, "Female friendships were one of the targets of the witch hunts. It was in this context that 'gossip' turned from a word of friendship and affection into a word of denigration and ridicule."[10]

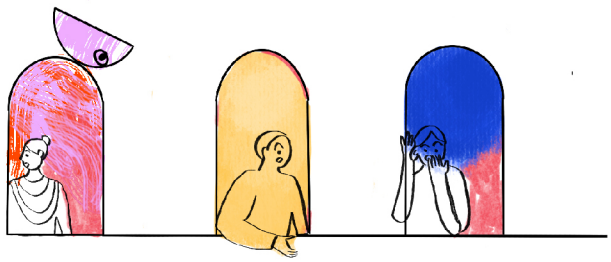
In the 1500s, gossip was incriminated as a crime and the punishment for the one who gossip entailed wearing a face gear for several hours called "scold's bridle" that would refrain the wearer from eating, drinking and talking, with its first recorded use being in 1567 in Scotland.[11] In most of the cases, a scold was defined as a sharp-tongued, loud woman who gossips and spreads lies.[12] This conflation of gossiping and lies resulted in an order issued by the Church in 1547 that declared women's gathering a crime with punishments include wearing the gossip's bridle, or in some cases death by drowning and immolation.[13] This witch hunt relieved men of the blame of gossiping, as patriarchy dictates that when men gossip, it is for important matters, but when women do, it

is nagging.

In an attempt to control women, while demonizing them, the word 'gossip' was demonized with its direct attribution with women - a misconception that persists even today. While gossiping was a way to bond with other people in a community, but over time, negative connotations came to be attached to them. It is true that while gossip is not necessarily negative, it does, in many instances, take the shape of a rumor that turns negative at the expense of the person being talked about.

RUMOR MONGERING AS A FORM OF MIS/DISINFORMATION

Gossip as it currently stands are understood as rumors intended to spread unverified information about a person in their absence. Rumors, while may not intentionally be planned, the impact of the information being passed around can be interchangeably termed as misinformation and disinformation.



Rumors, spread on individual and community level, can be referred to as an act of sharing information and spread on a model of Chinese whispers - a concept where a piece of information is distorted as and when it is passed on to more and more people. In many cases, unverified information initially shared with no malicious intention can end up posing serious reputational, psychological or physical harm to the subject of the rumor. The damage of misinformation and disinformation have proven to be severe in various cases where reputation of a person is involved. Particularly in Eastern and conservative societies, they have resulted in murders by people close to the victims. These are not hypothetical or isolated incidents, but in fact, are very common especially in South Asian countries where family's honor is associated with a person's body, especially a woman's body. This paper will discuss implications of disinformation campaigns on women through in-depth case studies.

Historically, rumors and gossiping are referred to as women's "intrinsic" characteristics to pit women against each other, and to discredit the information they relay. Where women were considered to be the originators of gossip, rumors and misinformation, they are in fact victims of organized disinformation campaigns. It would not be incorrect to say that the way gossip was associated with women in the middle ages was also an attempt to silence women and that further promoted violence against them in societies around the world. A flash survey conducted for this paper to understand people's attitudes, out of 110 people who responded, where almost 52% said that everyone gossips, 36.4% said that men do it the most, whereas, only almost 12% respondents associated gossip with women.[14] This indicates that attitudes around gossip are changing. When respondents were asked, in a second survey, to share their opinion regarding who targets women with false information attacking their character, out of the total of 169 respondents who interacted with the survey, 66.3% said that men are the perpetrators of such false information.[15]

Gossip and patriarchal punishments associated with it are not just a thing of the past, as demonstrated in the cases described in the next sections, gendered misinformation and disinformation have become very common in the modern world. With the spread of digital technologies, when people who navigated the real world occupied the internet as well, this violence against women in the form of false information translated onto the online public spaces with consequences as severe as ever before. It is seen that spread of false

information against women is a form of gender-based violence.

DISINFORMATION AS A SEPARATE FORM OF EGBV

Gendered disinformation can be defined as "a subset of online gendered abuse that uses false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination."[16]

It is abundantly clear that when women are targeted with false information about them, the nature of the said information is always personal, gendered and sexualized. It attacks their personhood, their identity as a woman, their character and reputation that is then seen as attached to the honor of the family and community they belong to or represent. In cases where a woman is targeted because of her work, for instance, disinformation campaigns against women journalists are very common around the world, the woman being targeted will rarely ever be accused of spreading incorrect information through her reporting. Instead, these campaigns involve sexualized and gendered slurs. As a recent example, when revelation of the use of Pegasus spyware on 50,000 phone numbers around the world was made public, it was found that women journalists in the Middle East were actively targeted by the governments to discredit their work. The phones of women journalists were hacked with the zero-click spyware and their private photos were published online to target their character. Ghada Oueiss, one of the victims of Pegasus hack, said, "They wanted to say, ;She's trying to be professional and serious, but she's just a prostitute and you shouldn't believe her anymore.' I know they want to silence me, but I will not be silenced."[17]

Rasha Abdul Rahim, director of Amnesty Tech, a division of Amnesty International focused on technology and surveillance tools, said, "Women's freedom of expression is abused and targeted in a very specific way both online and offline," adding, "The focus is on silencing them, putting the attention on their bodies or what they should be wearing or saying."[18]

The weaponizing of women's bodies to target and discredit them is an age-old trick as it leads creating a hostile environment engendering silence or compliance. Violation of privacy and objectification of personhood puts these women under scrutiny of unwanted and intrusive eyes, equivalent to constant. Anushka Jain, a lawyer who works at the Internet Freedom Foundation, India, and is providing legal assistance to two women who were targeted with Pegasus in the country, says, "A woman being targeted for surveillance is different from a man being targeted because any information can always be used to blackmail or discredit her."[19] Vrinda Bhandari, an Indian lawyer working on issues of digital rights in the country, says that when women are surveillance or targeted digitally, it is in fact a violence on their bodies, "When their phone is hacked, women experience this not just as a privacy violation, but also as a violation of their bodily integrity - akin to bodily violence," she said.[20]

This is so women's bodies have been sexualized enough over time by men and the society at large has come to associate honor with their bodies that attack on a man involves attacking the women associated with them through sexualized and gendered slurs.[21] Hence, when women are targeted with campaigns to discredit them, it is always an attack on their bodies and on their character. For instance, after the death of Indian actor Sushant Singh Rajput, his girlfriend actor Rhea Chakraborty was accused of blackmailing him prior to his death leading to his suicide on June 14, 2020. Chakraborty was slut shamed [22] and threatened with rape and murder.[23] The denationalization around the case as she attended multiple court hearings and subjected to media trials that further led to her being surveilled and details of her life and her relationship with Rajput were

laid bare. BBC wrote, "Conservative television hosts have described her as a 'manipulative; woman who 'performed black magic' and 'drove Sushant to suicide'. On social media, she has been trolled mercilessly and called a 'fortune huntress', a 'mafia moll' and 'sex bait to trap rich men'".[24]

While Rhea Chakraborty was under investigation for the death of Sushant Rajput, she herself became victim of a hate campaign affording her personal life and her family no privacy. This further explains that when women are subjected to the public eye, their personal life is disproportionately scrutinized and targeted while people make accusations regarding their character, leaving the onus of proving their innocence and morality on them.[25]

In other instances, where women are targeted for their work, more than their professional credibility, their morality and character are targeted, something that is not seen in cases where men are targeted for their job. These cases are commonly experienced by women journalists and activists who fall victim to campaigns meant to discredit them and their work. However, while men journalists also face campaigns targeting their work, what's different in the ones pointed towards women and those towards men is that in cases of women, it is always sexualized and gendered rather than critiquing the work that women do.[26]

Gharida Farooqi, a prominent journalist in Pakistan, says in the study Hostile Bytes published by Media Matters for Democracy, "Men get abused but the kind of abuse they face is different than that of a woman's. A man's pants are never discussed but a woman's jeans are talked about, in a vulgar and dirty way. Men are called out for being a 'lifafa' journalist or appeaser. Their character or dignity is never talked about. They both get [targeted] but the target's extent and intensity are very different."[27]

The impact of gendered disinformation on women who fall victim of it is severe, personally, professionally and psychologically. Jannat Fazal, a psychologist who has extensively worked with victims of online violence, says that while the psychological impact of online harassment and gendered disinformation are similar, she has found survivors to be panicking and blaming themselves when, for example, their morphed images are circulated.[28] She said, "The most common psychological impact includes helplessness, fear, anger and anxiety. These emotions are recurrent, because you cannot stop that person [who is circulating disinformation about you] unless you reach out to [law enforcement agencies] and [they] take action, which takes months." Jannat is of the view that offline harassment and spreading of rumors about a person dies down after a while, but online harassment does not end.

She adds that on top of these emotions, the society ensures that the survivor of violence also faces other deeply disturbing emotions like guilt. "The way society deals with instances of morphed images and gendered disinformation, and the way society induces guilt in the victim is very evident and remains the same as in the case of non-consensual use of intimate images. In cases where deep fakes and morphed images are made of a girl, she is blamed for having such images in the first place that could be easily morphed." Jannat adds that where this kind of response to gendered disinformation or violence is psychological, it directly impacts how they access public spaces and how they are allowed to express themselves. "Survivors are blamed so much for these experiences that at times women have been forced to leave those spaces even if they did not do anything, just because the family kept blaming them for it or took away the access."

Jannat further says that the magnitude of these emotions can differ in each case, but these reactions to gendered disinformation and other forms of online violence are common in almost every case. It is important to highlight that every person reacts differently to the violence they face, and over time after repeatedly being

subjected to campaigns of disinformation and online harassment, a sense of indifference is noted.

Women journalists have been subjected to constant personal, gendered and sexualized abuse in the name of criticism of their work, and those at the forefront of journalism are an example of how they are targeted. In India, journalists like Rana Ayyub, who has been targeted both on the basis of her gender and religion as a Muslim women, have faced constant hate campaigns with false accusations made against her. Recently, a First Information Report (FIR) was registered against her claiming that she has misappropriated funds collected for ration drives in 2020 and 2021 for communities badly affected by COVID-19. Rana told Reporters Without Borders (RSF) that everything was above board and that she has herself reached out to the Central Board of Direct Taxes to demonstrate her good faith.[29]

Hindu nationalists in India have been targeting Rana with hateful and organized campaigns on the internet for years to discredit her and her work. In another instance in 2018, a parody account that looked almost identical to the Indian news channel Republic TV's account[30] on Twitter appeared and shared a tweet falsely attributing it to Rana Ayyub that said, "Minor child rapists are also human, do they have no human rights. This Hindutva Government is bringing ordinance for death to child rapists just to hang Muslims in larger numbers. Muslims aren't safe in India anymore."[31] The tweet went viral with screenshots being shared on Facebook and in WhatsApp chats, with the campaign's sole purpose to attack her. She responded to the tweet through a Facebook post with, "The enormity of the fake news problem in India. Few have realized that it is a fake Twitter profile, and it is being shared on almost every third Facebook page/WhatsApp group. This is a virtual lynch mob!"[32]

LAYERS OF GENDERED DISINFORMATION

Gendered disinformation is not something that only happens on an organized level to women and gendered individuals who have a public presence. In fact, it is the reality of young girls and women who navigate the internet for their basic communication and entertainment. A good early example of mapping gendered disinformation are 'confession pages' on Facebook, usually specific to educational institutions, where anonymous confessions were made about a person whose identifying information is posted through the administrator of the page. While most of the pages that were reviewed for this study are now inactive or post promotional content, the older content point towards a longstanding issue of sensationalizing rumors and gossip that eads to social isolation and call outs.

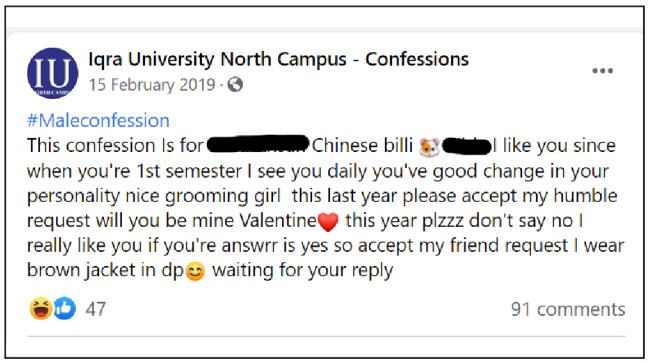
A cursory look at the confession pages, that are often named after particular universities, i.e. 'XXXX University Confessions' or other derivatives of it, suggests that although the so-called confessions were not restricted to

women only, the descriptors and differences between posts about women and those about men were glaring. Men were either identified by their name or which class they study in with the person confessing, confessions about women always had physical descriptions about their appearance and what they wore along with the class or the location they were seen at.

Exhibit A:[33]

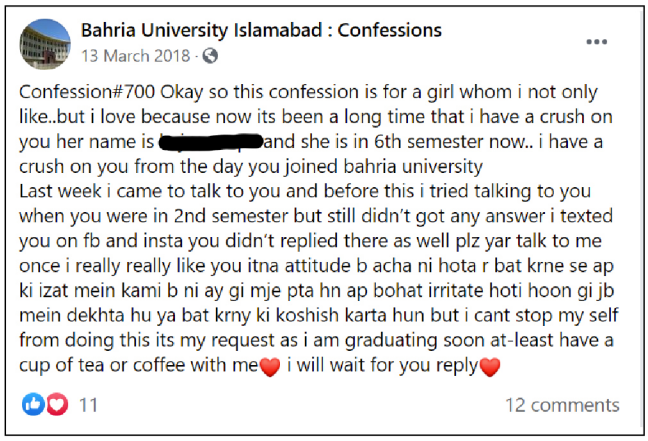
Exhibit B:[34]

Exhibit C:[35]



[Full name of the woman is redacted to protect identity]

While it could be argued that these confessions are not gendered information as no defamatory claims are being made about the person who is the subject of the post, however, it is important to address that just like online harassment has many forms and can differ with tone, language, context and impact, gendered disinformation follows similar patterns. In the aforementioned examples, it is evident that the tone of the posts could be seen as innocuous, but the implications of posts targeting women are severe, especially when compared with those directed towards men. This is primarily because of how the spectators address and respond to the two kinds of posts. Where a woman's confession about a man is met with men encouraging and laughing, the impact of the posts about women, identifying them with their full name, can have severe consequences.



Women are named and identified with specific details leading to people commenting on them online and identifying them offline.[36] *[Full name of the woman is redacted to protect identity]*

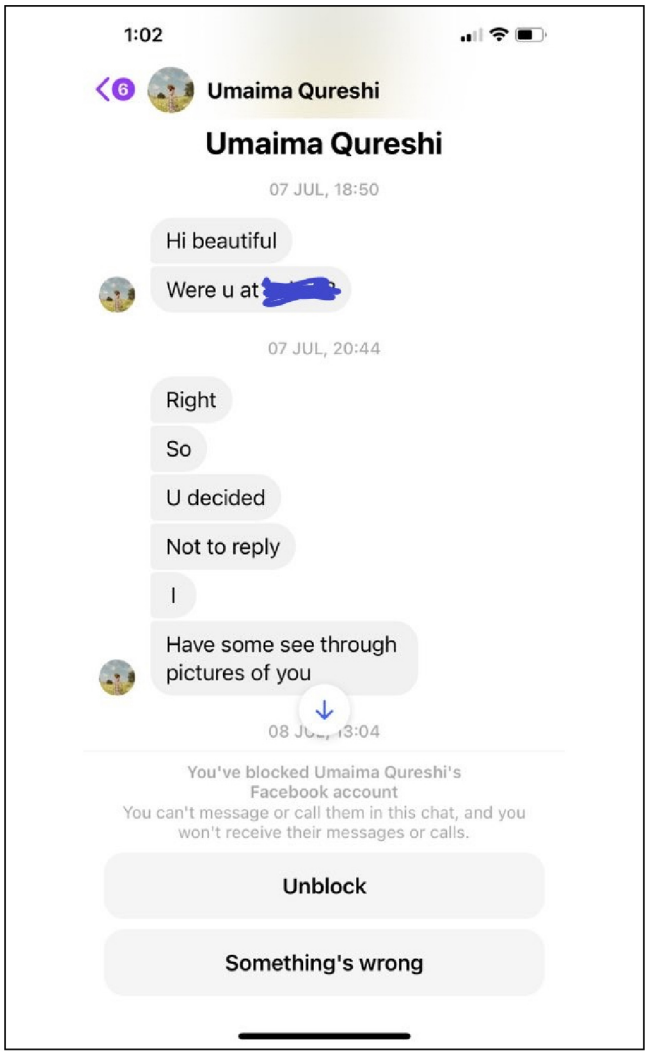
"It shattered my confidence"

In 2019, Javeria, a young graduate from Islamabad, became the subject of a confession on her university confession page.[37] A fellow student posted about having a crush on her after she participated in a cultural event on campus. She says, "During the rehearsals, I noticed a couple of boys randomly lurking in and sitting in the front rows of the auditorium. [They were] hooting as I'd come on the stage. I didn't care or notice

too much," adding, "On the [event] day, after the walk, someone posted a 'crush confession' on our university's confession page saying that he had been stalking the girl in the orange frock since so long and would be grateful if someone connected him to her. He also mentioned my department and said she's from social sciences."

Javeria says that while she was not directly named as the boy who posted the confession did not know her name yet, people - including her own friends, started tagging her under the confession post leading to several people directly contacting her. She says that she felt anxious and scrutinized on the campus after the post. "It obviously made me feel really bad. I felt targeted and felt really anxious, especially because people started calling me bhabhi [sister-in-law] around my department and I just hated it." She adds that while other students were constantly harassing her because of the confession of an anonymous person whose identity she is still not sure about, her own friends constantly teased her using the post. "It shattered my confidence," she said.

Following this incident, Javeria became a constant target of similar incidents where men on the campus felt entitled to infringe her privacy as they deemed fit. She informs that people started making assumptions about her character, and how "I must have enjoyed all the attention because I dress in modern clothes." In another instance after the confession, someone in her class took a photo of her without her knowledge in the class, and tried to blackmail her with. "I received an anonymous message from an Instagram account with zero posts and zero followers, that they had my photos." She blocked the account, but the person then contacted her from a blank account on Facebook Messenger with the same message. Javeria responded and the account sent her photo taken from a strategic angle making her cleavage to be apparent. She says that she deleted the photo instantly because she felt exposed. As a result, Javeria stopped wearing western clothes to campus, but to this day, she continues to receive unsolicited messages making insinuations about her character and spreading false information.



Javeria received a message on Facebook Messenger from an anonymous account claiming that they had her photos.[38]

What follows after incidents where women are, directly or indirectly, linked with men they are not related to is a barrage of insinuations made about their character leading character assassinations directed at them. Women are socially isolated as a result, putting them under constant scrutiny of public eyes. For a young woman to go through these experiences is often traumatic, especially considering they become subject of gossip and rumors within the institution they have to navigate every day. The psychological impact of isolation, according to Jannat Fazal, a psychologist, is anxiety, sadness and helplessness.

"It haunted me for four years"

In another instance, a young girl, who wishes to remain anonymous, in her years of undergrad, was subjected to harassment throughout her time at university after a boy she was friends with dropped out of university and got into drugs.[39] His friend's group of 8 boys placed the onus of his actions on her and harassed the girl for years "for breaking his heart". She says, "He had this big group of boys, around 20-25 boys from different departments, some seniors and some juniors, and they all used to catcall me and make me uncomfortable." She says that initially she could not understand why those boys targeted her, but eventually gleaned that she was being blamed for a relationship she never had. She adds, "I never knew he had feelings for me or that I broke his heart."

The rumor eventually took a life of its own. She adds that boys, who were younger and joined the university years after he left, would constantly message her on social media to tell her that she should not have broken his heart. "I was now in my 8th semester, and the boys in first and second semester messaged me. They never met him but only knew him by his name. This rumor continued to spread and I was being harassed even 2 years after he had left the university."

The girl says that after she graduated in 2018, she finally gathered the courage to confront the boy who denied ever spreading these rumors. "He said [that] he never told his friends about any breakup. They fabricated the whole story to amuse themselves and bullied me for the sake of fun," the girl added. "This rumor of supposed heartbreak was created as a practical joke by them and it haunted me for four years," she concluded.

These cases are not isolated incidents, instead, are very common in universities and other educational institutions where women constantly live-in fear of being a subject of any rumor or gossip. But while the spread of rumors of this kind often happens in limited spaces mostly only consumed by the students of the education institution, other forms can be more public leading to unprecedented abuse targeted towards women.

"I just fight back"

Imaan Hazir Mazari, a lawyer by profession, is a vocal advocate of human rights in Pakistan. Given her platform, she has been a target of gendered disinformation campaigns for years. She says, "One of the earlier events where I was targeted with gendered abuse online was when I posted about being groped in a PTI [a political party in Pakistan] jalsa. I was subjected to character assassination for pointing out my experience of harassment." She adds, "I was initially only using Twitter, but over time moved to Facebook and YouTube as well. So if you go under my YouTube videos and see the comments, you would see the kind of comments I receive. People are calling me a randi, a gashti [derogatory gendered terms implying having multiple sexual partners], even when I'm talking about prison reforms or any other rights-based discussion."

Comments under Imaan Zainab Haazir's YouTube video about Prison Reforms

After the Faizabad dharna [sit-in] in 2017,[40] Imaan uploaded a video on her social media criticizing the failure of the state in controlling the law and order situation in the country. She says that given the sensitivity of the situation, she deleted the video immediately, but it had already gone viral leading to unprecedented abuse targeted towards her. "When I woke up the next day, my phone was bombarded with notifications. People were abusing me by associating me with being funded by [Indian Prime Minister] Modi. My photos were morphed on half naked bodies, and there was this one video where a woman was dancing and people were claiming her to be me when I was not in the video." The video still exists on YouTube and has over 26,000 views at the time of writing this paper.

After the constant abuse she was targeted with, Imaan says this was the first time she deactivated her accounts out of safety concerns for her family who were getting graphic threats as a result. "I was in Vienna at the time, but my family was still in Pakistan. So, some people, advised that I should be careful. I was also told to not come to Pakistan because the threats were very real at the time."

Google Image Search shows the kind of claims that Imaan has been targeted with for years.

However, this was not the first time gendered and sexualized disinformation was used to abuse Imaan. In 2015, Imaan's photos from her time in college were spread on social media, and her support for rights of gender minorities was used to targeted her. These photos were reshared in 2017 after her video regarding Faizabad dharna, casting aspersions on her sexuality. Imaan posted a status on her Facebook at the time stating, "[The abuse] will never stop and I get it. It comes with the territory. Women are constantly objectified, used and abused all over the world to settle some messed up point-scoring agenda. I make no apologies for who I am and what I stand for. Trying to reduce me isn't going to make it happen. I didn't stop then, I won't stop now. Nor am I ashamed of how I dress or how I choose to live my life."

Imaan Zainab Mazari-Hazir
27 July at 15:00 ·
Follow

The only reason this post is necessary is because of the flood of messages I've been receiving asking if I know about my pictures being circulated on the internet.

I know. I don't care. I used to care. I used to allow myself to be bullied on the internet. But with time & growth comes strength.

Two years ago, i voiced my opinion on how the LGBTQ community should not be discriminated against & persecuted. Some losers managed to get a few pictures of me partying and circulated them calling me a lesbian.

I criticized the govt, bureaucracy & military a few days ago and those same pictures from 4-5 years ago have been dug up to be re-circulated with a different agenda - possibly, multiple agendas.

It'll never stop & I get it. It comes with the territory. Women are constantly objectified, used & abused all over the world to settle some messed up point-scoring agenda. I make no apologies for who I am and what I stand for. Trying to reduce me isn't going to make it happen. I didn't stop then & I won't stop now. Nor am I ashamed of how I dress or how I choose to live my life.

P.s. a little party never killed nobody so maybe the people circulating my pictures (for whatever reasons) should get a life & stop probing into mine.

Imaan posted a status on Facebook in 2017 in response to the barrage of abuse directed towards her while using her old photos. Source: Facebook

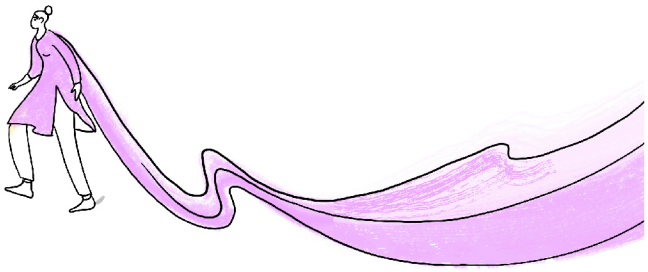
According to Imaan, people target women who are vocal and are not scared to express their opinions. "They want to silence women because they cannot stand a woman who is not scared of them. I just fight back."

Imaan has not always been like this. Initially, when she started getting abused on the internet, she would cry and would be anxious all the time. But as she has been facing the trolls and their gendered and sexualized

abuse for years now, she says she has developed a thick skin against it. However, she still has weak moments, she says. "I still get very anxious when people take my words out of context and try to portray things in a different light." She is particularly concerned about the instances when her politics or the causes that she stands for and have been fighting for are targeted. "It damages the causes that I support." She acknowledges that it has very real-life impacts that she constantly faces. "The threats [that I receive] are so real that when I was teaching in Quaid-e-Azam University, I would get very specific threats like 'See you after class at this time.' I have gotten rape and death threats on the internet, so I'm always looking around when I go out."

INFORMATION DISORDER TO DISCREDIT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE

In 2017, a campaign led by students was in full swing at Jadavpur University in Calcutta, India that demanded a formal legal body to be established that would address and investigate cases of sexual violence in the university. The campaign also demanded representation of students in this legal body to ensure impartiality and transparency since the existing mechanism to deal with such cases was found to be unsatisfactory and inefficient.[41]



During this campaign, a male student from a rural background who moved to Calcutta to study was accused of sexual harassment by a woman who had also moved from Delhi to Calcutta to study at the same university. She complained about the incident to a political organization she was affiliated with and which also had a presence on the campus. The said organization agreed to look into the matter and decide the best possible way through which the case could be resolved. These discussions took place in the absence of the accused as the alleged victim was not comfortable with his presence.

The alleged victim, through the political organization, posted a Facebook status detailing the incident which led to a barrage of attacks directed towards her. Since both parties belonged to the working-class communities, the narrative on the internet soon shifted to how the girl was framing the boy because he is from a village with different values and social status. In the midst of this, the accused disappeared from campus and the discussion on the internet erupted into an organized disinformation campaign against the complainant, who did not understand Bengali, the local language that was being used to target her. The campaign played out the fact that the accused belonged to a marginalized community, whereas falsely claimed that the woman came from a privileged background. Pamphlets were circulated with content that attempted to assassinate the character of the complainant by highlighting the fact that she was a feminist, came from an urban society, wore non-traditional clothes and smoked cigarettes. All of these factors were used to create an "information disorder" which argued that the woman had used her privilege to falsely accuse a man of sexual harassment who had come from a less privileged and rural setting.

This information disorder was weaponized to make the audience doubt the complainant's claim and to discredit her experience on the basis of her perceived upper-class identity. This case was a classic example of a woman's independence being used against her through information warfare by a society that refuses to question the man accused of misconduct.

The incident led to the woman deleting her online profiles, a common result of an online attack where the victim is eventually de-platformed. She joined social media after the campaign against her died down,

however, this time she actively self-censored and refrained from maintaining a public profile. She did so to avoid any attention from those who may have been involved in steering the campaign against her.

DISINFORMATION AND THE LEGAL LANDSCAPE

The harms that accrue from disinformation and gendered disinformation are immense, there is very little consensus on how to deal with cases of disinformation. Some countries have enacted laws to penalize misinformation and disinformation. For instance in 2020, through a last minute amendment made in a proposed law, the Philippines pass the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act that gave special powers to criminalize false or fake information regarding Covid-19. [42]

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the ability for countries to pass laws such as these, however many had already passed laws and regulations in place to address mis- and disinformation. A report on Sub-Saharan African countries shows that between 2016 to 2020 the number of laws or regulations in place on addressing false information jumped from 17 to 31.[43] The report found that 10 of the 31 of the laws did not required harm to be shown as a pre-requisite for punishment. Furthermore, most the laws took a punitive approaching the issue which as briefly alluded to above has the effect of individualizing the problem rather than connecting it to structural factors.

Laws addressing false information often run afoul of free speech issues, however it would be a falsity to simply state that these laws are solely a product of authoritarian regimes in the Global South seeking to curb freedom of expression. Germany's Network Enforcement Act, 2018 (NetzDG) is an example of a Global North country introducing a speech restrictive law that obligates social media companies to remove 'manifestly unlawful' content within 24 hours, however is being used as a model for more authoritarian regimes to clamp down on free expression.[44] Indeed, the European Union is seeking to control disinformation through the legal system, it is moving away from its model of "disinformation is not per se illegal, but it is harmful".[45] This is important to note and emphasize, that restrictive measures to contain disinformation are not just a Global South phenomenon, rather very much rooted in global debates of governance. Furthermore, Global North laws (both proposed and existing) fail to address the specific harms of gendered disinformation in a satisfactory manner.

The difficulty of defining disinformation discussed above, is particularly worrisome when it comes to legal interventions as laws dealing with speech and expression are required to be specific and narrow in their scope to prevent misuse The fungibility of a concept like disinformation, and the expansion of its scope through the inclusion of gendered disinformation, poses a particular set of problems for the law. The protective-ness of the press and ability of vague laws to be weaponized against marginalized communities, including women and gender minorities, is not unwarranted. International law standards have warned against such legal interventions, especially in countries with lack guardrails of rule of law to ensure these laws are not misused. The Human Rights Committee, as far back as 1999, expressed its concerns regarding laws that made the publication of false news a crime "merely on the ground, without more, that the news was false" to be in Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). [46]

Taking a feminist and harms-based approach, by way of centering the harms that stem from gendered disinformation, this paper argues that existing laws on gender-based violence, both online and offline, need to be strengthened in both scope and implementation in order to address gendered disinformation. It is only through centering of the experiences and harms of the communities and individuals who are the intended targets of gendered disinformation can be begin to

address them.

DEFAMATION LAWS

Existing laws have also been used to tackle the issue of disinformation with defamation laws being a natural place to turn to for many jurisdictions. Defamation laws are centered on protecting the reputation of individuals from harm stemming from false information, and can be both civil and criminal in nature.

The UN Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and 'Fake News', Disinformation and Propaganda categorically excluded criminal defamation as a restriction to free speech. The repeal of criminal defamation laws by many countries[47] in recent years also adds weight to the argument that criminal defamation laws are unnecessary and civil defamation and criminal incitement laws are sufficient for the purpose of protecting people's reputations and maintaining public order.

Addressing gendered disinformation through criminal defamation laws would be counter-productive. This is because the criminalization of the spread of information itself would result in the misuse of the law in cases where there is no malicious intent. An effective strategy would be to monitor the harmful effects of the disinformation and whether a woman has been subjected to a criminal act due to the damaging gossip spread about her. This could be both online and offline, and these actions can be prosecuted using existing criminal provisions. This would also prevent overlap in crimes as there is no new provision being introduced to deal with gendered disinformation.

ACCESS TO THE LAW

For women and other gender minorities, access to the law may not be as simple as it seems. While this paper argues for recognition of gendered disinformation as a separate form of gender-based violence within existing legal frameworks, one must be cognizant of all the factors that play against the victims/survivors when it comes to approaching the law and its implementing bodies. Women and gender minorities who do approach courts often speak of a re-traumatization at the hands of the law enforcement bodies and courts. Pursuing legal action often requires them to relive their experience, subject themselves, their lives and character to intense scrutiny, be subjected to patriarchal attitudes in the form of victim-blaming, paternalism or, in some cases, harassment and violence.

The entire legal framework in most countries is designed to fail victims and survivors of gender-based violence, puts women and gendered bodies at a disadvantage and also discourages them from seeking redress from the courts. For instances of gender-based disinformation, it would be even more complex for women to prove that; a) harmful information or gossip is being spread online and; b) the information directly impacts her online presence and also poses a risk to her offline.

The current legal system was not framed to protect women and to offer them recourse, rather the intention to pass draconian laws has always been based on serving the interests of those drafting the laws and those benefiting from it. This results in the abuse of the law and reveals inadequacy of every branch of the system to deal with gender-based violence. In light of the gaps and failure of the legal system coupled with the societal attitudes towards gendered disinformation and gender-based violence on the internet as discussed in this paper, it is crucial to take actions on policy level that priorities wellbeing of women and gendered individuals as a primary objective. Without a holistic reform of these systems,

legal interventions will always been inadequate and will fail to provide meaningful relief to those who suffer gendered disinformation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of the case studies and legal framework, below are some of the policy recommendations that can be adopted immediately.

- On a policy level, the state must recognize gendered disinformation as a distinct form of online gender-based violence and steps must be taken to ensure that it forms part of all government campaigns and programs dedicated to the protection of women and gendered individuals.

- Sensitize law enforcement agencies to deal with victims of gender-based violence and adopt mechanisms that allow women to approach these agencies safely to register complaints.

- Decriminalize speech-restrictive laws such as criminal defamation laws as they are rarely used to protect targets of gender disinformation, rather serve interests of those seeking to silence speech.

- Ensure holistic reform of the legal system to ensure that it is friendly towards victims and survivors seeking legal redress.

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FACT-CHECK: ARTICULATING A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO GENDERED DISINFORMATION

violence
rape
Motor Way Incident
JUSTICE FOR NOOR
Beela Crises
None of us are free
until
we are free
time to ghabrana
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BILL
DISINFORMATION

"Just because a thing has been written down, Sir, does not mean it is God's truth."

INTRODUCTION

The magnitude of "disinformation" is undoubtedly severe; people usually believe whatever information their social networks relay to them. Simply writing "post-truth" on any search engine would produce countless links to articles referring to the impact of disinformation across the world. Having said that, many of the stories that one hears from pundits, journalists, and scholars about disinformation pertain to major political events and focus squarely on the role of social media platforms in spreading and generating false content. These narratives imply that before the rise of social media platforms, everyone perhaps shared a uniform sense of what was true and what was false; and that this collective understanding was reified by legacy media such as newspapers and television news. This would lead one to believe that disinformation is singularly responsible for a global far-right shift to populism, exemplified by incidences of prominence such as Brexit and the Trump presidency (that interestingly led to Trumpisms such as "fake news" and "alternative facts"), and not the other way around.

These negative repercussions in the form of an 'information disorder' could, however, be challenged by taking a more discerning and historicized approach towards what we read and hear. Analysis regarding disinformation is rarely, if ever, contextualized or politicized; its spread or impact cannot be measured without recognizing how successful disinformation campaigns leverage long-held prejudices about identity, oppression and inequality. The role of actors other than social platforms is often ignored, particularly the historical role of mass media itself in spreading propaganda or suppressing dissenting voices. Nor does the concept of 'disinformation' take into account the undeniable social, cultural, and political differences in how people discern between legitimate and illegitimate forms of persuasion. Hence, while the role of legacy media, such as television and newspapers, 'fake news', disinformation, and inauthentic online behavior explain the national far-right shift to populism or hardliner religious fanaticism in the world, the targets of disinformation, marginalized groups and identities, are rarely discussed.

Certainly, if one were to look at disinformation from a feminist perspective, this problem is not new at all, as women and gender minorities have been harmed through manipulation of information throughout the course of time. Hence, a feminist perspective of disinformation necessitates questioning of power, institutions, and economic, social, cultural, and technological structures, and their role in shaping it. Moreover, theories on disinformation should be unequivocally linked to the commitment to fighting for equality and justice for marginalized communities.

This article, after outlining how gendered disinformation works as well as its impact, will highlight how feminist resistance to disinformation has been shaped globally. It will mainly focus on the ways in which gendered disinformation is spread to further propaganda and suppress feminist political expression by assessing the complicity of the state, media, the establishment, and social media platforms. Ultimately, the article will attempt to imagine feminist struggles against gendered disinformation outside of solutions that simply propose more media and digital literacy, and the ethical priorities of feminists while fighting gendered disinformation.

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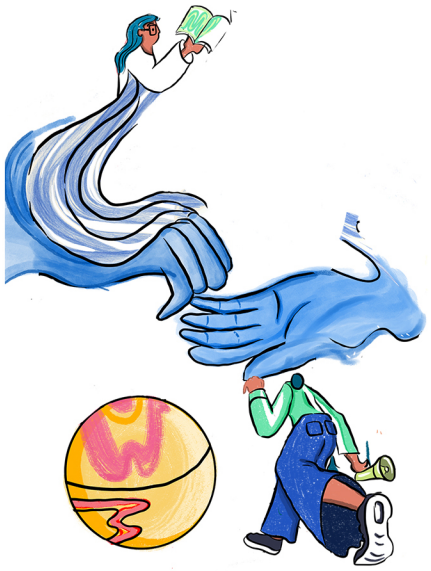
THE POLITICS AND IMPACT OF GENDERED DISINFORMATION

Disinformation is spread at the expense of the silencing of numerous histories, bodies, and politics. Misogynistic narratives tend to spread either negative representations of women and gender minorities as enemies in public debate or pitiful, disempowered depictions as victims, often in order to push a specific agenda. It has been observed that character-related disinformation has been leveraged systemically to undermine the political commitments of feminists. One can see this in examples of International Women's Day demonstrations across the world being undermined on the basis of feminists having ill-intentioned hidden agendas.[1][2]

According to Maria Giovanna Sessa, gendered disinformation can be understood as "the dissemination of false or misleading information attacking women (especially political leaders, journalists and public figures), basing the attack on their identity as women." A specifically feminist approach to gendered disinformation requires that we do not only focus on cisgender women, but also acknowledge that transgender and non-binary people also bear the brunt of disinformation. For instance, trans-exclusionary radical feminists, or TERFs, spread hate and disinformation against transgender people and gender minorities who, despite being at risk on the basis of their gender identity and/or sexuality, are falsely maligned for allegedly causing harm to societies or "spreading pedophilia" merely for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, gender identity, and love.

Just like far-right religious conservatives, some 'radical feminists' claim gender does not exist, despite evidence disproving the male-female binary, uniting to justify anti-transgender advocacy in terms of a broad consensus across the political spectrum. For them, only 'biological sex' exists; they claim that allowing transgender women into single-sex spaces would endanger cisgender women. Some accuse transgender women of endangering cisgender women in prisons, again without any evidence to back this up, even though many countries, with and without gender self-determination, already have transgender women in 'female' prisons. However, no one has been able to provide factual evidence in support of these anxieties that endanger transgender people, who are already marginalized on a whole.

This, Judith Butler posits, "is a reactionary incitement, an incendiary bundle of contradictory and incoherent claims and accusations." She asserts that attacks on so-called "gender ideology" have grown in recent years throughout the world, dominating public debate stoked by electronic networks and backed by extensive rightwing Catholic and evangelical organizations. Hence, this kind of bad faith, incendiary fear-mongering, which aims to imperil an already vulnerable group, qualifies as disinformation, and is premised on the anti-feminist notion that "the traditional family is under attack, that children in the classroom are being indoctrinated to become homosexuals, and that 'gender' is a dangerous, if not diabolical, ideology threatening to destroy families, local cultures, civilization, and even 'man' himself." Interestingly, feminists who decry this kind of transphobia risk being labelled a misogynist.



The example of TERFism illustrates that the techniques for spreading gendered disinformation are diverse and include rhetoric that perpetuates stereotypes, the hyper/de-sexualisation of minority gender groups, mischaracterisation/character assassination, and/or online harassment and cyber-attacks. Moreover, gendered disinformation has the effect of perpetuating a negative perception of women and non-binary people in society: it undermines their credibility, hinders them from occupying positions of power, discourages them from participating in public debates, and serves to silence them in general.

MISOGYNY, DISINFORMATION AND THE MEDIA

The media has undoubtedly had a fundamental role in producing and reproducing social and cultural norms which influence notions of justice and equality throughout history. Misogyny in the media is defined in terms of either less representation, or the overall misrepresentation, of feminism, leading to a false portrayal of society through a skewed, patriarchal lens. Misogyny in media industries has become a growing problem the world over, and it aggravates online gender-based violence. It is significant in shaping the glut of ‘fake news’ that is spread online across news outlets and social media platforms precisely because it is widespread.

The comparatively stable public sphere of the twentieth century once depended on the gatekeeping function of major newspapers and television news; a function they no longer play. This can be explained by how social media has inevitably changed how we view the public square, having introduced new structuring principles in public discourse, due to the design and profit model of individual platforms. Consequently, the media infrastructure by which ‘publics’ come into existence has become more fractured because of the advent of online spaces. Hence, we have to rethink the public square in terms of inclusion; online feminist discourse will undoubtedly be opposed en masse because of the nature of digital spaces.

Moreover, it has become exceedingly clear over the past decade that while new media technologies have the potential to push for social change, make noticeable dents in existing political systems, and challenge multiple forms of oppression, they also lead to the proliferation of online forms of patriarchal control, harassment, and misogyny. There have been numerous high profile

stories about the online hatred, trolling and stalking of women, and a growing concern over the normalization and tolerance of rape jokes and images that celebrate gender-based violence on social media platforms.

While women journalists have rallied against misogynistic attacks in various contexts - one of countless examples being within the sports journalism field in France - not much has been done by media industries to counter this issue or observe the particular forms of misogyny in a digitally mediated culture , much less analyze the range of feminist responses to this problem that mobilize new media technologies in innovative and creative ways.

Negative representations of women and gender non-conforming people showcase them as enemies repeatedly in order to fuel the public debate, while simultaneously aiming to achieve an emotional response among targeted audiences, primarily through the invocation of anger or a sense of moral outrage. All these forms of abuse and violence coalesce to bolster gendered disinformation, and are spread with the sole purpose of undermining women and non-binary people.

This problem leads to numerous barriers for feminists in politics, from media bias and online harassment to gendered disinformation. Misogynistic disinformation is often combined with different audience-dividing topics in order to polarize public opinion. In a study on online feminisms in Brazil, Mariana Valente and Natalia Neris assert that the International Working Women's Day causes polarization in the country's political debate online. They add:

> "On one hand, there is the anti-PT (Workers' Party) side formed by liberals, conservatives, people calling for military intervention and political parties from the current government's base of allies; on the other hand is the anti-anti-PT side, made up of NGOs, opposition parties, left-wing groups and social movements, including the pages of the feminist, anti-racist and LGBT movement. This polarisation can clearly be observed from the activity on these Facebook pages, as individuals who follow some pages also follow others from the same side, but rarely follow pages from the opposite side."

The rise of populist and right-wing politics across the world is further contributing to the normalization of anti-gender policies, as seen in the example of TERFism; this is damaging in regards to the participatory rights of minorities and women. The example of anti-gender rhetoric in Europe shows that the common existence and acceptance of anti-feminist language in politics and public life legitimizes the prevalence of everyday gender-based violence, and further lends itself to the spread of gendered disinformation.

Given that the Internet has become a key source of information on politics, the existence of gendered disinformation invariably has severe implications for equal and diverse representation in modern politics. The UK General Election in 2019 witnessed MPs and former government ministers stepping down and not opting for re-election because of the role of online gendered abuse and misinformation. Kim Barker and Olga Jurasz argue that such incidents are not isolated to any one election cycle or one jurisdiction.

In 2016, the examples of high profile MPs such as Julia Gilliard in Australia and the late Jo Cox, who was brutally murdered by a far-right bigot, both highlighted the dangers brought about by gendered disinformation, misogyny, online abuse and fake news driven by the politics of the far-right. The Inter-Parliamentary Union in 2018 reported a high level of harassment and violence against women in politics, with 85.2% suffering some form of psychological violence as a result of their role in parliament. Furthermore, Barker and Jurasz assert that according to research, there is a correlation between the spread of disinformation relating to the roles, campaigns, beliefs, and actions of women in politics, and the harassment and abuse that is meted out to them as a result.

This, of course, is not a West-specific issue, with growing attention falling on the role of gendered disinformation in politics and in online communications in other contexts, such as the red-tagging and arrest of Lady Ann "Icy" Salem, editor of Manila Today (affiliated with the alternative news network AlterMidya). Her arrest followed statements by Allen Capuyan, executive director of the government's anti-Communist task force, who red-tagged several news organizations under AlterMidya without proof. This illustrates that irresponsible red-tagging remarks by government officials have heightened cyberattacks, harassment and death threats, as well as offline assaults, arbitrary arrests, and attempted murders of journalists, including women, throughout the Philippines.

As highlighted in the example of TERFism, disinformation tends to address important issues in a convincing way, so as to polarize public opinion and strengthen the proposed perspective, narrative or ideology; it makes sense then that patriarchal views tend to contribute to the wave of disinformation significantly. This is what research has shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as online spaces have become increasingly gendered, misogynistic and vitriolic. False information during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the parallel infodemic, has seen an increase, as it has been spread persistently in various contexts.

The link between waves of gendered disinformation and celebrations of the International Women's Day around the world during the pandemic cannot be overlooked. Sessa gives the example of the International Women's Day in Spain, which explains "the deliberate search for direct causation among spurious events that is typical of conspiratorial narratives." Sessa notes that this event created the perfect storm to present feminist issues as a threat to society while exploiting public safety concerns related to the virus. She claims that the protest was the subject of by far one of the largest campaigns of gendered disinformation encountered in a single country. She explains, "As the pandemic imposed unprecedented social distancing measures, a number of outlets produced biased coverage of the 8M celebration in Spanish cities, pointing to the event as responsible for an acceleration of the pandemic." Sessa notes that the gendered disinformation in this case was more fixated on the negative portrayal of feminists as law-breakers, rather than legitimate concern about health risks. Even though the protest was authorised, a state of emergency was declared in Spain a few days later in response to the backlash surrounding it. This is a prime example of how gendered disinformation is quick to adapt according to the prevailing circumstances, as has been seen during the pandemic. Sessa elaborates, "This stickiness applies to gendered disinformation in a transversal manner that affects various countries.

The rise in online gendered abuse, violence and disinformation has undeniable repercussions for women and gender non-conforming people who end up withdrawing from public life, both online and off. The scale and everyday occurrence of these phenomena has a silencing effect on them, with many feeling they cannot freely

express themselves. Having said that, social media has really helped in advancing and sustaining the participation and work of feminists, and has undeniably shaped feminist politics and movements in recent years. Social media platforms are interactive and accessible, and therefore allow feminists to build solidarities and communities in service of movement-building work. Without such interactive platforms, equality of representation would be an unachievable goal, and systemic stereotypes would go unchallenged publicly.

Given the potential benefits of being visible online, and of participating in political life, the challenges posed by gendered disinformation, online abuse and violence, and the targeting of politically visible women and gender minorities are significant. Political bodies and non-governmental organizations have highlighted the challenges posed by gendered disinformation and bias, yet little has been provided in terms of substantive measures to address the issue. Having said that, one can turn to feminist approaches to discern how sources of disinformation can be effectively challenged.

A FEMINIST APPROACH TO DISINFORMATION

When the subject under scrutiny is a woman or non-binary individual, it is important to bear in mind that one of the most recurrent patriarchal strategies to counteract their power has been the deformation, or even total silencing, of their life stories. Newspapers, literature and even 'official histories' have omitted or consciously changed the tale told of gendered lives in order to comply with the social norms dictated by patriarchy throughout the centuries. For instance, in the case of gender minorities, their very existence has been criminalized and negated through regressive laws and conceptions that have failed to understand the gender and sexual diversity within a particular context. The enactment of the colonial penal code across British colonies is a prime example of this.

Feminists counter disinformation through affect. Feminist rage upends shame resulting from sexual violence, as well as the gendered power relations that give rise to and legitimize such violence and humiliation. Rage as an affect is seen on both sides, in that anti-feminists also evince anger and moral outrage, but I contend that rage that propels one to speak truth to power is an inherent part of the feminist fight against disinformation. This kind of affective intensity is a manifestation of the self-relation that points to, opposes, and facilitates the countering of gendered power. Because of its dismantling, counter-oppressive character, feminist rage is never eradicated. Hence, a feminist response to disinformation primarily entails cultivating a feminist consciousness that can redeploy counter-normalizing and counter-shaming potential in the form of anger that challenges gendered power, sexual violence and stigma. Expressions of feminist rage are crucial for both individual survivors and more broadly within feminist anti–sexual violence protest and resistance.

Understanding the politics of emotion around feminist responses to disinformation allows one to attend more closely to the contentions and fissures that traverse these struggles, to develop a politics of affective recognition as a basis for constructing feminist solidarities around disinformation locally and internationally. A focus on anger and rage, among other feelings, helps us not only to trace the binary oppositions that characterize online discourses around these protests but to capture their unstable ambivalence between authenticity and inauthenticity, highlight their potential to point beyond existing boundaries and demarcations, and permit new imaginings of what 'truths' could look like.

Then, of course, is the feminist tradition of rewriting histories. Feminists recognize that history itself is revisionist, inherently 'masculine' and capable of marginalizing the life experiences of already oppressed communities. Oral testimonies have not only highlighted the experiences of outliers, but also presented subjectivities as truths to be considered. Hence, oral history as a methodology is indispensable in feminist re-writings of history. One example is that of feminist historians from South Asia who have spoken to women survivors of gendered violence to retell the history of the Partition of Pakistan and India. Hence, writing women and gender non-conforming people into history is a way of ensuring that what we know of political and social events is not riddled with bias.

Thirdly, feminists fight propaganda through educational work, by creating discourse and narratives that define the aims of feminist movements. Social media has paved the way for the creation of unique educational resources, especially to demystify feminist theories and academic work in simple language. In that sense, feminists are always 'working' online and making the internet a space where everyone has access to information about feminist politics. This can be seen by the kind of online education campaigns that are helmed by grassroots feminist organizers across the world.

Additionally, feminists' struggle to influence and define the agenda of the media and communication processes since the past few decades is also nothing new. The movement's organising process has involved reflecting critically on the media and developing alternative media channels to disseminate information on certain issues and give voice to the marginalised. Valente and Neris mention that in Brazil, since the 1970s, newspapers such as Brasil Mulher (1975-1979), Nós Mulheres (1976-1978) and Mulherio (1981-1987) have played this role. The internet supplements these practices by allowing communication of "everyone with everyone." In addition to its use as feminist media, the internet and its web applications have led to the creation of new formats for interaction such as meetings, exchanges and connections, which take place regardless of people's geographic location among those who share the same interests, but who may never meet in person. Thus, it has made transnational exchanges possible.

In addition to serving as a medium for feminist media and its usefulness for the coordination of meetings and feminist praxis that take place offline, social media itself is a space for activism and debate; these interactions have renewed feminist practices and discourses. By amplifying voices that previously did not have access to a media structure (due to media concentration, censorship and the practice of broadcasting a very limited range of voices on news channels), women and gender non-conforming people can quickly expose cultural and behavioral patriarchy, and react to violence and cisheteronormative male domination. One of the popular forms of this kind of mobilization is campaigns that use hashtags to organize reporting: the most prominent example of this being the global #MeToo movement. The prevalence of the #MeToo hashtag across the world marks efforts to showcase the rise of gender-based violence and people's lived experiences under it, especially to challenge naysayers of feminism. Another example

to consider is that of black feminists in the US initiating the powerful #YourSlipisShowing campaign, as a response to Twitter trolls masquerading as women of color with the fake hashtag #EndFathersDay. While this is only beginning to attract mainstream media attention, feminists have been constantly fighting back against the proliferation of rape culture and gender-based violence through their uses of new media platforms and technologies.

Thus, it is clear that for feminist movements, social media platforms help in popularizing feminist discourse. The internet has provided the infrastructure needed to promote direct and immediate access to feminist debates and texts. Today, on social media, feminist demands are being shared to form a subaltern counterpublic that disrupts the hegemonic public sphere and counter its exclusions. And, in this negotiating process, confrontations and reactions inevitably occur.

Even though many feminists who have reported sexual assault or harassment on social media have had to deal with ensuing defamation suits and allegations of falsehood, they have managed to narrate their own truth and for it to spread across platforms despite bearing risks, like in the case of Peng Shuai's allegation against a political representative of the highest leadership of China's communist party. Similarly, a number of websites, Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags have been created by feminists to document, photograph, and record instances of misogyny and harassment, raising public awareness and creating communities to support victims. Hence, feminists everywhere are creating a living archive of stories, past and present, to amplify narratives of resistance and create critical forms of political engagement.

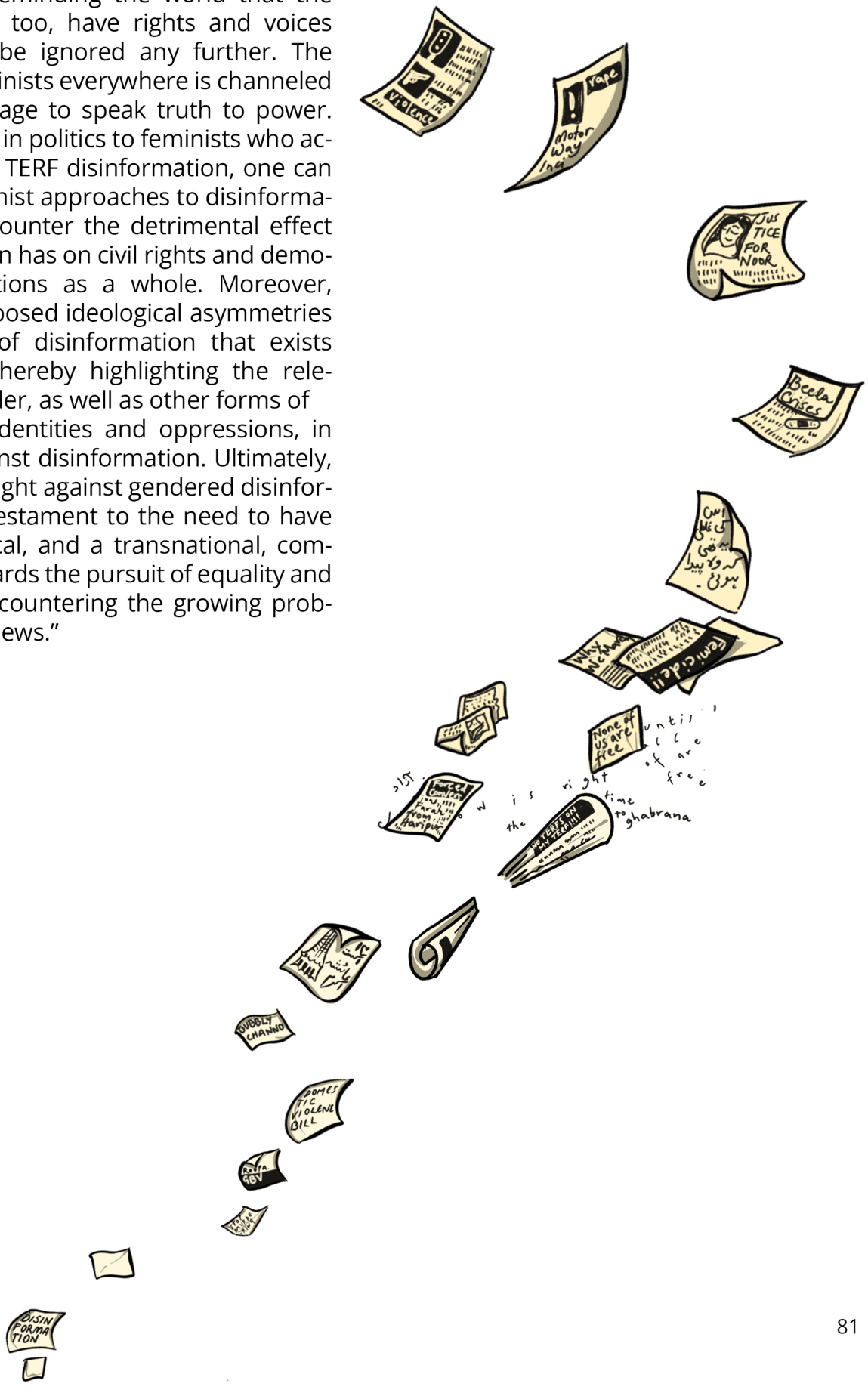
An incisive instance of feminists fighting disinformation through public awareness campaigning is fact-checking projects such as FemFacts, aimed at tackling some of the false narratives about women published by European media as well as counterbalancing the dominant male perspective in editorial boards across Europe. FemFacts focuses on the nuances of false news by highlighting its skewed nature and particular standpoint from which it promotes anti-feminist rhetoric. The project started as a way to give women more of a voice in the European media landscape, and then began to focus specifically on false claims and online disinformation about gender issues. Many online communities and media platforms, run by and for younger feminists, do similar work across the globe.

Lastly, feminists have fought the algorithmic gender bias prevalent on social media platforms borne in the Global North, with the understanding that the bias that machine learning acquires must be addressed alongside the implementation of legal measures and an overall change in social attitudes to address disinformation. Beyond this though, media sectors as a whole must take more responsibility in terms of their reporting standards and share the nuances of feminist narratives. By taking a multifaceted and discerning approach, gendered disinformation – and its harms – could be reduced, and the internet could finally become a place that works for women and gender non-conforming people.

Feminist thought is fueled by the idea that love and justice are complementary to revolution and change. It is focused on healing, reconciliation, and an understanding that the language of feminism is one that can transform society into one where sexual, racial/ethnic, spiritual, psychological and social equity are afforded. It must be remembered that this spirit is deeply embedded in any feminist resistance against disinformation.

CONCLUSION

By and large, feminists have been clear about how they want their history to be told. They have stood up against prejudice and disinformation by bringing up questions of power and reminding the world that the marginalized, too, have rights and voices that cannot be ignored any further. The power of feminists everywhere is channeled by their courage to speak truth to power. From women in politics to feminists who actively oppose TERF disinformation, one can see that feminist approaches to disinformation aim to counter the detrimental effect disinformation has on civil rights and democratic institutions as a whole. Moreover, they have exposed ideological asymmetries in the kind of disinformation that exists around us, thereby highlighting the relevance of gender, as well as other forms of intersecting identities and oppressions, in the fight against disinformation. Ultimately, the feminist fight against gendered disinformation is a testament to the need to have an unequivocal, and a transnational, commitment towards the pursuit of equality and justice while countering the growing problem of "fake news."



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