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# GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION 101:

## THEORY, EXAMPLES, AND NEED FOR REGULATION

By EU DisinfoLab & #ShePersisted

# EU DISINFO LAB



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## About EU DisinfoLab

EU DisinfoLab is an independent non-profit research organisation specialised in analysing disinformation.

We uncover and expose sophisticated disinformation campaigns. We seek to amplify the voices of our community of counter-disinformation experts across the EU and contribute with collective expertise to policy making.

You can find more information about our work on our website:

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This Technical Document is the result of a collaboration between EU DisinfoLab and #ShePersisted. It offers a short and practical toolbox of what should be considered when speaking of gender-based disinformation.

## I. DEFINITIONS

Gender-based disinformation (GBD) – also called gendered disinformation – focuses on the intersection between [disinformation and gender](#), where [women, gender non-conforming people, and marginalised groups such as LGBTQIA+ individuals](#) are disproportionately targeted and harassed by spreading deceptive or inaccurate content about them. The techniques for diffusing gendered disinformation are diverse, and can comprise misogynist comments that reinforce gender stereotypes, the sexualisation and diffusion of graphic content, online harassment including threats of violence, and even cyber-attacks. We support an intersectional [activist definition](#) that goes beyond a binary conception of gender, and which evolves with our understanding of and responses to the phenomenon.

## II. TARGETS AND MOTIVES

GBD mainly targets women in positions of power and visibility, like journalists, activists, and politicians. These actions can be part of an organised campaign against a particular person aiming to silence them and even force them to leave the online space or activism altogether. Therefore, [gender-based attacks and disinformation threaten democracy by deterring girls and women from active political or civic participation](#), as the [Plan International report](#) shows, perpetuating the notion that decision-making is a 'man's job'. In the words of the Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations, Jukka Salovaar: ["online harassment is not gender-neutral"](#).

## III. GBD AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Another layer of complexity, especially relevant in the context of regulation, is that while some practices are illegal, such as doxing, others are 'simply' harmful. GBD is also difficult to isolate and define because it exists at the crossroads of [disinformation and online violence](#). Furthermore, cyber-harassment affects women's [mental health](#) and can escalate to violence and even murder, as in the case of Maltese journalist [Daphne Caruana Galizia](#) in 2017.

Unfortunately, more often than not, coordinated campaigns of GBD successfully reach their goals of silencing their targets. For these reasons, it is crucial to address gender-based online violence in an all-encompassing way that considers the intersection with GBD and pays particular [attention to coordinated campaigns](#).

## IV. RECENT EXAMPLES

### War in Ukraine

The [militarisation](#) of society in the context of the war – as the Ukraine war – usually [reinforces traditional gender roles](#): i.e., the protector–protected binary, embodied by males and females, respectively.

Regarding current events, Kristina Wilfore commented that “Ukrainian women have long been subjected to gendered stereotypes that expose them to overt [sexualisation](#) and perpetuate expectations that they must be generally beautiful, obedient partners, and easily available for sex.” This makes them particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, dehumanisation, and objectification during conflicts. In July 2022, the Disinformation Situation Centre identified paid advertisements on YouTube depicting photos of attractive women as needing Western men for refuge, advertising a chat service to [“cheer Ukrainian girls up.”](#)

In addition, the emasculation of Ukrainian men is underpinned by negative and discriminatory attitudes towards feminine qualities and is ultimately aimed at portraying men as weak. The imagery of women participating in military and civilian resistance received heavily sexualised coverage and was used by Russian sources to mock and undermine Ukraine’s military. These [binaries are sticky](#) and tend to persist long after the crisis.

### Covid-19 pandemic

Similarly to what [happened during the pandemic](#), the crisis-induced sense of emergency can be exploited to promote a zero-sum game in which the pretense of other priorities is weaponised to stall or reverse gender equality and women’s rights, such as [reproductive rights](#). A test of this case was Victor Orban’s 2020 implementation of extraordinary constitutional powers to fight the pandemic that was soon used to [backslide women and LGBTQ+ rights](#) in line with a longstanding populist agenda.

### Women’s leadership

For instance, a report from the [NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence](#) revealed that the Finnish government, led by a majority of women, received a disproportionate amount of gendered online harassment throughout the state of emergency declared due to the pandemic. Recently, another controversy emerged as a leaked video of [Prime Minister Sanna Marin at a private house party](#) tried to portray her as unfit to hold office. Many pointed out that similar footage starring a man would not have caused such an outrage. So, this kind of attack unique to women, and it is also harder for them to recover and reaffirm their credibility. As a result, the request to take a [drug test](#) following the video’s release emphasises a double standard. At the same time, Marin’s stress-induced response of crying at a press conference reinforces the original intent of the attack.

## Elections

During recent national elections in [France](#) and [Germany](#), women candidates were far more likely than men to be targeted by disinformation campaigns and abusive messages. During the 2021 Bundestag election in Germany, [attacks](#) against Greens candidate Annalena Baerbock were deeply gendered, including sexualised image-based abuse, and often featured illegal hate speech that platforms failed to address. Not only was this distressing for the candidates, but [the public platforming of gendered abuse is set to have a longstanding effect on democratic equity](#).

## V. REGULATION WITH A GENDERED LENS

Research has shown that GBD has a [chilling effect](#) on women and girls' political participation, as young people witness systemic inaction in the face of misogynistic abuse and are discouraged from public-facing careers. Contributing to forging and perpetuating a discriminatory environment, [GBD often legitimises and leads to offline violence](#).

Therefore, it is crucial to promote [legislative measures that can minimise direct harm to individuals and ensure the smooth functioning of democracy](#). In this regard, the [Digital Services Act](#) opens a new era in access to justice for disinformation and online hate, also when motivated by gender. In addition, we believe that the [Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) that the European Commission proposed in March 2022 [could and should address gender-based disinformation](#).