

## **Strengthening democracy and accountability and protecting women's rights in the digital era: The impacts of online GBV and disinformation on women politicians in representative democracies**

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### **Summary of text:**

Women are under-represented in government at executive, national and local levels in almost all countries. Gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence (OGBV) are part of a larger problem of violence against women in politics, with both seeking to undermine the political efficacy of women in public spaces. OGBV targeted at women politicians is predominantly directed against them because they are women and less so because of their political views or policies. As with gender-based violence, where the perpetrator uses violence to control the woman, perpetrators of OGBV against women politicians are attempting to control how the public views them. A similar trend can be observed in the case of women journalists.

Gendered disinformation is a related problem. Gendered disinformation campaigns aim to undermine women political leaders by spreading false information about their qualifications, experience, and intelligence; sometimes making use of sexualized imagery as part of their tactics. These campaigns are predicated on existing discrimination against women in society and may characterize women candidates as not being qualified for a position, lacking the requisite knowledge or experience for a role; or as persons who are too emotional for the task. The goals of gendered disinformation can include maintaining the status quo of gender inequality or creating a more polarized electorate. These campaigns can make politically engaged women more likely to reconsider their ambitions and victims can face significant long-term effects, including physical and psychological damage.

### **Key recommendations:**

- The United Nations should provide additional resourcing to facilitate and support the development of research into gendered disinformation, with the objective of determining its collective impact on the participation of women, transgender, and non-binary individuals in public life. Addressing the challenges faced by women politicians requires intersectional analysis which takes account of multiple sources of oppression interacting simultaneously. UN Women should be provided with the requisite resources to support Member States to develop training on gendered disinformation.
- Policymakers must adopt a holistic perspective when developing responses to OGBV. Bolstering the existing legal framework or introducing new legislation is appropriate to address some forms of OGBV, while other instances require a co-regulatory approach, including improvements in content moderation mechanisms and due diligence from online platforms.
- It is vital to ensure that initiatives to combat OGBV and disinformation are proportionate and that they do not unintentionally infringe upon the rights of those they aim to protect, including their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of participation.
- Regulators should require technology companies, including social media platforms, to commission independent human rights impact assessments on incidents of OGBV and gendered disinformation, including number of incidents, reports, and resolution of cases, which are broken down by gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, and other important demographic categories.
- Technology companies should explore ways to make more data about their platforms available to independent researchers in a manner which is secure and preserves privacy. This could enable researchers to better understand the trends and impacts of OGBV and gendered disinformation, as well as to evaluate potential solutions.