The Impacts of Online Gender-Based Violence and Disinformation

on Women Politicians in Representative Democracies

Expert paper prepared by:

Dhanaraj Thakur & Asha Allen[1]

Center for Democracy & Technology

---

[1] The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

UN Women CSW 67 Expert Group Paper

October 11-13 2022

Theme - "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.

Authors: Dhanaraj Thakur and Asha Allen

Introduction

In almost all countries around the world women[2] are under-represented in government at the executive, national, and local levels.[3] Apart from the injustice that this situation creates,[4] there are many important reasons why women should also be political leaders, including being able to bring their experiences to bear on important legislative and policy debates, in ways that men cannot do on their behalf.[5] This is particularly relevant where there is a history of systemic discrimination and barriers to entry for women in representative politics.[6] These include structural (e.g., the gender wage gap and labor force participation rates), institutional (e.g., electoral and political party systems that support men), and cultural (e.g., patriarchal attitudes towards women's leadership).[7]

In this paper we focus on an additional set of barriers to entry for women in representative politics and challenges for those who are already elected representatives. Specifically we examine the problems of online gender-based violence and gendered disinformation targeted at women politicians. Both gendered disinformation and online GBV are part of the larger

---

[2] In this paper we focus on people who identify as women (compared to men). We do not address the experiences of people who identify as non-binary, who may in fact also be subject to significant online GBV and disinformation (see for example, Wirtz, A. L., Poteat, T. C., Malik, M., & Glass, N. (2020). Gender-based violence against transgender people in the United States: a call for research and programming. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, *21*(2), 227-241..

[3] See https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/leadership-and-political-participation/facts-and-figures

[4] Phillips A. 1998. Democracy and representation: or, why should it matter who our representatives are? In Feminism and Politics, ed. A Phillips, pp. 224–40. Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ.

[5] Mansbridge, J. (1999). Should blacks represent blacks and women represent women? A contingent" yes". The Journal of politics, 61(3), 628-657.

[6] Mansbridge (1999)

[7] Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2001). Women and democracy: Cultural obstacles to equal representation. Journal of democracy, 12(3), 126-140.

problem of violence against women in politics[8] and both are often aimed at undermining the political efficacy of women in public spaces. In addition, we take an intersectional approach to this analysis, recognizing that the problem is not just about gender. That is, people hold multiple identities all the time, and gendered disinformation and abuse may be predicated on other identities too such as race. In this way researchers and policy-makers can better understand both how a person may have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time, and the unique impact from that form of oppression.[9]

We review evidence from several countries to demonstrate how gendered disinformation and online GBV targeted at women politicians and women of color politicians is significant. We argue that this is a serious issue and threatens the quality of our democracies. Finally, we also suggest potential policy and legislative solutions primarily drawing examples from the EU but which, we argue, may be applicable elsewhere.

Online GBV and Gendered Disinformation

It is important to recognize that gender is a multi-dimensional concept and can represent a range of socially constructed characteristics associated with masculinity, femininity, neither, or a combination of both.[10] There are different forms of gender expressions that people may identify with using pronouns and descriptions such as she, he, they, ze, non-binary, transgender, etc. These can also include and sometimes overlap with sexual orientation. Societal beliefs about gender influence how power is distributed and the ways in which discrimination takes place. Indeed, much of how we engage with others offline and online is influenced by our beliefs about gender and reactions to different gender identities.

Engagement shaped by gender identities includes gender-based violence (GBV), which as defined by UNHCR includes sexual, physical, mental and economic harm inflicted in public or in private and also includes threats of violence, coercion and manipulation,[11] which are common and significant problems online. Online harassment and abuse based on one's gender expression can take a range of forms: verbal abuse, threats of violence, non-consensual image/video sharing, stalking, theft of private data, doxing (publishing or sharing someone's personal data online without their consent), creating and sharing fake images/video without

---

[8] Krook, M. L. (2020). Violence against Women in Politics. Oxford University Press.

[9] Crenshaw, K. (1990). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. Stanford Law Review, 43(6), 1241–1299.

[10] Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. Gender & Society, 18(4), 510–531.

[11] https://www.unhcr.org/gender-based-violence.html

consent, and more.[12] As with GBV in general, women are more likely than men to be targeted by online GBV, and this pattern has existed for some time now around the world.[13] While trans and non-binary persons are also subject to high levels of GBV;[14] in this paper we focus primarily on gender in terms of women and men.

A subset of the larger problem of online GBV is online violence targeted at women in public life such as politicians and journalists, often with the aim of undermining their careers and silencing them. This includes for example, the use of social media and other tools to distribute denigrating images, harassing and abusive content and threats of violence at women politicians.[15] While online GBV against women politicians is perhaps a relatively recent phenomenon, it is part of a longer trend of violence against women in politics, where they have faced more offline violence than men politicians.[16] A similar trend can be observed for women journalists.[17] Online GBV targeted at women politicians is predominantly directed against them because they are women and less so because of their political views or policies.[18] And as with GBV in general, where the perpetrator uses violence to control the woman, perpetrators of online GBV against women politicians are attempting to control how the public views the woman politicians.

A related problem that several researchers have identified is "gendered disinformation" which is targeted at women politicians, also with the aim of controlling the public's views of the woman and undermining her political efficacy. In general disinformation is one of three types

---

[12] Kee, J. S. M. (2005). Cultivating Violence through Technology? Association for Progressive Communications Women's Networking Support Programme. https://www.apc.org/en/pubs/issue/gender/all/cultivating-violence-through-technology

[13] For examples, see global reports such as Amnesty International. (2018). Toxic Twitter: A Toxic Place for Women. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-1/; Plan International. (2020). Free To Be Online? PlanInternational.Org. https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline; and World Wide Web Foundation (2015) Women's Rights Online: Translating Access into Empowerment. World Wide Web Foundation

[14] Wirtz, et. al. (2020).

[15] Bardall, G. (2013). Gender-Specific Election Violence: The Role of Information and Communication Technologies. Stability: International Journal of Security and Development, 2(3), Art. 60. https://doi.org/10.5334/sta.cs

[16] Krook (2018).

[17] Posetti, J., Shabbir, N., Maynard, D., Bontcheva, K., & Aboulez, N. (2021). The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper (p. 94). UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/publications/thechilling

[18] Barker, K., & Jurasz, O. (2018). Online Misogyny as Hate Crime: A Challenge for Legal Regulation? (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429956805

of false information: malinformation, misinformation, and disinformation.[19] Malinformation refers to accurate information presented in a way intended to create harm. Misinformation is false information that is not necessarily created or shared to create harm; the person sharing it may not even know it is false. Disinformation is false information that is intentionally designed to mislead people, and often has a political or social goal, including undermining trust in democratic institutions.[20]

Gendered disinformation more specifically involves intentionally spreading false information about persons or groups based on their gender identity;[21] it not only holds negative views of women politicians, but it also seeks to reinforce that bias. For example, gendered disinformation campaigns aim to undermine women political leaders by spreading false information about their qualifications, experience, and intelligence, sometimes using sexualized imagery as part of their tactics. These campaigns are predicated on gender biases and existing discrimination against women in society and may characterize women candidates as not being qualified for the position, lacking the requisite knowledge, intelligence, or experience for the role; or as persons who lie, are too emotional for the task, prone to aggression, or lacking sanity.[22] The goals of gendered disinformation can include maintaining the status quo of gender inequality or creating a more polarized electorate.[23] One unsurprising finding, in keeping with research on online GBV, is that gendered disinformation has a disproportionately negative impact on women. For example, one study looking at the 2020 U.S.

---

[19] Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe. https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html

[20] See, Jack, C. (2017). Lexicon of lies: Terms for problematic information (p. 22). Data & Society. https://datasociety.net/pubs/oh/DataAndSociety_LexiconofLies.pdf; Starbird, K. (2019). Disinformation's spread: Bots, trolls and all of us. Nature , 571 (7766), 449–449. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-02235-x; Bennett, L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. European Journal of Communication , 33 , 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760317

[21] See Di Meco, L. (2019). #ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World (pp. 1–58). The Wilson Center. https://www.she-persisted.org/s/191106-SHEPERSISTED_Final.pdf; and Jankowicz, N., Hunchak, J., Pavliuc, A., Davies, C., Pierson, & Kaufmann, Z. (2021). Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies are Weaponized Against Women Online | Wilson Center (pp. 1–63). Wilson Center. https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/malign-creativity-how-gender-sex-and-lies-are-weaponized-against-women-online; Krasodomski-Jones, A., Atay, A., Judson, E., Smith, J., & Lasko-Skinner, R. (2020). Engendering Hate: The contours of state-aligned gendered disinformation online (pp. 1–41). Demos. https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf

[22] These specific false claims against women are extremely old and have a history for example in U.S. culture. i.e. women as hysterical or insane. See for example, Gilman, C. P. (1892). The Yellow Wallpaper: A Story. The New England Magazine, 11(5). https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/006786569.

[23] Sessa, M. G. (2020). Misogyny and Misinformation: An analysis of gendered disinformation tactics during the COVID-19 pandemic. EU DisinfoLab. https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/misogyny-and-misinformation:-an-analysis-of-gendered-disinformation-tactics-during-the -covid-19-pandemic/.

primary elections found that women candidates were more likely than male candidates to be the focus of fake accounts, which are an important tool of many disinformation campaigns.[24]

Women of colour may be more likely to be the subject of disinformation when compared to others, with the intersecting dynamics of racial discrimination being utilised in addition. Disinformation campaigns rely on existing discriminatory narratives to build credibility for the false information being shared. Intersectional disinformation may therefore draw on multiple discrimination against multiple identities to build credibility around a false message such as gender, race, age, caste, disability status, immigration status, and sexual orientation among others.[25]

For example, one study which examined social media conversations about Kamala Harris (an African American and Indian American woman) during the 2020 U.S. Presidential election campaign, and found that she was the subject of four times as much misinformation when compared to white men in similar campaigns over the last four years (e.g., Michael Pence and Tim Kaine).[26] There is unfortunately not enough research that examines disinformation targeted at women politicians from an intersectional angle, although some suggest that the problem is worse for women of color politicians.[27] One upcoming project aims to determine if women of color are more likely to be targeted by or the subject of online mis- and disinformation than other types of candidates (e.g., white women, white men, and men of color) using a dataset of all candidates that ran in the 2020 U.S. Congressional elections.[28]

There is similar but limited evidence about online GBV and women of color (including politicians). For example, one study found that women of color politicians faced more abuse than any other type of candidate on the social network services Twitter and Facebook. For example, Democratic Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (a Somali American) received the highest

---

[24] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). Running While Female: Using AI to Track how Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

[25] Thakur, D., & Hankerson, D. L. (2021). Facts and their Discontents: A Research Agenda for Online Disinformation, Race, and Gender (p. 55). Center for Democracy & Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/facts-and-their-discontents-a-research-agenda-for-online-disinformation-race-and-gender/

[26] See, Seitz, A. (2020, October 29). Harris is a target of more misinformation than Pence, data shows. AP NEWS. https://apnews.com/article/election-2020-joe-biden-race-and-ethnicity-media-misinformation-50d958ff5d534179bad07bcf607590cc

[27] See Jankowicz, et. al., 2021.

[28] See https://cdt.org/insights/understanding-the-impacts-of-online-gendered-disinformation-on-women-of-color-in-politics/

proportion of abuse and harassment on Twitter, and Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (a Puerto Rican American) received the most abuse on Facebook.[29]

More generally, one 2020 international survey of young women and girls in 22 countries found compared to respondents in general "[i]f you are Black, from an ethnic or religious minority, have a disability, identify as LGBTIQ+ ... you will be harassed even more."[30] A 2018 study of Twitter found that women of color were 34% more likely to be mentioned in an abusive tweet when compared to white women, with Black women in particular subject to more abuse — they were 84% more likely to be mentioned in abusive tweets compared to white women.[31]

Gendered disinformation flows from the same patriarchal context in which people experience online GBV, and so there is often an overlap between this type of disinformation and online GBV. For example, some forms of online GBV can include false information as part of a campaign of harassment. The harms that stem from gendered disinformation and online GBV are similar and include perpetuating bias and falsehoods, psychological abuse, or real world impacts. However, as one scholar activist[32] has argued with a few exceptions,[33] many researchers and in fact most policy-makers and social media platforms overlook these similarities, in particular the coordination around the creation and distribution of harmful content.

The Impacts of Gendered Disinformation

Gendered disinformation campaigns can impact politically engaged women, including advocates and civic leaders, in a variety of ways, not only on the individual level, but on women as a group. For those experiencing these campaigns firsthand, they can prove to be persistent forms of distraction: by trying to regularly refute personal attacks and falsehoods, women candidates will have less time to focus on substantive issues and the wider discussion about them will follow that pattern as well[34]. Indeed, such experiences can cause personal harm, such

[29] Guerin, C., & Maharasingam-Shah, E. (2020). Public Figures, Public Rage: Candidate abuse on social media. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/public-figures-public-rage-candidate-abuse-on-social-media

[30] Plan International. (2020). Free To Be Online? PlanInternational.Org. https://plan-international.org/publications/freetobeonline

[31] Amnesty International. (2018). Troll Patrol Findings. Troll Patrol Report. https://decoders.amnesty.org/projects/troll-patrol/findings .

[32] Sinders, C. (2022, June 23). The Use of Mis- and Disinformation in Online Harassment Campaigns. Center for Democracy and Technology. https://cdt.org/insights/the-use-of-mis-and-disinformation-in-online-harassment-campaigns/

[33] See for example Di Meco, 2019 and Jankowicz et al., 2021.

[34] Oates, S., Gurevich, O., Walker, C., & Di Meco, L. (2019). Running While Female: Using AI to Track how
Twitter Commentary Disadvantages Women in the 2020 U.S. Primaries (SSRN Scholarly Paper ID

as distress, as well as a chilling effect on political or other speech. More broadly, as gendered disinformation becomes more common-place, these kinds of disinformation campaigns can make other women who are interested in politics more likely to reconsider their ambitions[35], which in turn harms efforts to build and sustain inclusive democracies.

A related problem are the chilling effects that disinformation campaigns pose, particularly for those in political positions. The prospect of harassment, defamation, doxxing, threats to family members, and other kinds of abuse actively discourage women and gender nonconforming individuals in political roles from expressing themselves online in a way that might draw public attention and scrutiny.

Women who are the subject of these campaigns can also face significant long-term effects as, given their severe nature, some of these attacks can yield physical and psychological damage that requires longer recovery times for the women, with implications for their political careers[36]. These harms are equally experienced by women journalists who, as essential civic space actors, are often confronted with similar campaigns aimed to discredit their journalistic efforts and which, in some cases, lead to threats against their physical safety. With the intersection between gendered disinformation and online GBV, and in recognition of the digitisation of political engagement, it's also pertinent to highlight the impact such experiences have on young women, the next generation of political leaders. As documented by the European Institute for Gender Equality, 51% of young women hesitate to engage in online debates after witnessing or directly experiencing online abuse[37]. A study commissioned by Plan International involving over 26,000 girls in 33 countries found that gendered disinformation can undermine girls' ability to see themselves as leaders with ideas worth listening to and with the ability to change the world[38].

Tackling online GBV and gendered disinformation

As has been established, online GBV exists on a spectrum and can take many forms, often having a chilling effect on women and non-binary people's speech. Due to this reality, policy-makers must adopt a holistic perspective when developing responses to the phenomena. In

3444200). Social Science Research Network. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3444200.

[35] Di Meco, L. (2019). #ShePersisted Women, Politics, & Power in the New Media World (pp. 1–58). The Wilson Center. https://www.she-persisted.org/s/191106-SHEPERSISTED_Final.pdf, quoting Julia Gillard, 27th Prime Minister of Australia.

[36] Wilfore, Kristina. (2020, September 25) Disinformation and Women's Leadership. Presentation at the Center for Democracy & Technology Research Workshop on Disinformation: Understanding the Impacts in Terms of Race and Gender. September 2020

[37] https://eige.europa.eu/news/cyberbullying-restricts-young-womens-voices-online

[38] The Truth Gap, How Misinformation and Disinformation Online affect the lives, learning and leadership of girls and young women, 2021, https://plan-international.org/publications/truth-gap

some cases, bolstering the existing legal framework or introducing new laws is appropriate, whereas in some cases a co-regulatory approach which emphasises increased due diligence from online platforms or developing improved content moderation mechanisms is the best course of action. Striking the balance between the protection of free expression, addressing illegal content and creating a safe online environment is a difficult endeavour. Therefore is it vital to ensure that initiatives to combat online GBV and disinformation are proportionate and effective, to ensure they do not unintentionally infringe upon the rights of those said initiatives aim to protect.

Within Europe there are several legislative initiatives being developed aimed to address online GBV as well as disinformation, though the intersection of these two issues of which we have outlined in this paper is yet to be discussed in depth politically. Most notable of these efforts however are within the European Union, with the draft Directive to Combat Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,[39] published in March 2022 and the Digital Services Act, which entered into Law in September 2022 and will come into force in early 2024 .

The draft Directive, though aiming to address gender based violence in Europe more broadly, places significant emphasis on criminalising 'cyber violence against women and girls'. More concretely, the Directive seeks to criminalise cyber stalking, non-consensual sharing of intimate or manipulated material and cyber incitement to violence or hatred, and establish minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of all victims of all crime. This emphasis on criminalising certain forms of online GBV is due to the limited legal basis on which is was developed; expanding the list of 'EU Crimes' to include GBV more broadly was not a viable political option as the Directive was being written, therefore the European Commission placed emphasis on setting criminal standards in areas in which it already held competence which in this case was cyber crimes. With this proposal, the European Commission ambitiously aims to establish uniform standards for the criminalisation of certain forms of online GBV, thereby creating more alignment between member states and better levels of protection for women across the bloc.

Alongside this, we have the Digital Services Act, the EUs Horizontal Regulation, which is set to establish a global precedent for online platform governance. The EU has taken inspiration from existing international standards, such as those outlined in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and has applied this methodology to the Digital Services Act. The Regulation adopts a two-pronged approach; on the one hand setting concrete obligations on how digital services must tackle illegal content and on the other, introducing novel due diligence obligations to address societal risks posed by the provision of services. This means that the aforementioned Directive should (in theory) complement the DSA; by including minimum rules for offences of cyber violence, which in the context of the DSA would be

---

[39] See https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022PC0105

classified as illegal content, relevant authorities are thereby empowered to issue orders for the removal of said content.

With the second aspect of the DSA's approach, the due diligence obligations, EU co-legislators identified some specific systemic risks to which very large online platforms should assess and mitigate, these include; any foreseeable negative effects on the exercise of fundamental rights, most notably free expression, human dignity and protection of personal data; negative impacts effects on civic discourse and electoral processes; and negative effects to the protection of public health, to minors and in relation to gender-based violence. This will require online platforms to conduct annual risk assessments to ensure their products and services do not infringe on the rights established in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, whilst paying specific attention to risks related to those identified above.

While the authors and other advocates in Europe very much welcome these initiatives, particularly in light of the halt in progress toward gender equality across the EU member states[40], of which the increase in online GBV is a contributing factor. However, these initial efforts will need to be upheld through diligent oversight and enforcement, consistent and meaningful engagement with civil society, and deep harmonisation across multiple co-regulatory frameworks in order for the EU's efforts to be successful.

Specifically, the aim to address gender-based violence with the due diligence provisions of the Digital Services Act must be much more explicit. The DSA references risks related to both gender-based violence and to participation in civic discourse/electoral process and our analysis proves that gendered disinformation rests clearly at the intersection of these fundamental rights. Therefore, efforts by online platforms to assess these risks and develop adequate mitigation measures must embed a gender-sensitive approach and pay specific attention to systemic risks that are cross-cutting and will disproportionately impact those from historically marginalised communities.

Harmonisation between these different regulatory approaches must be established, more importantly however, neither the provisions of the DSA nor the proposed Directive will be meaningful without the explicit incorporation of an intersectional methodology. Concretely, regardless of the jurisdiction, due diligence obligations will need to incorporate an intersectional approach in their development and assessments. Alongside this, the standards set by legal frameworks will need to ensure states incorporate the same methodology in the development of specialised service provision for victims, in the training of judicial and law enforcement authorities and in potential barriers to access to justice for victims from historically marginalised communities.

---

[40] https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021

This analysis of EU legislative and co-regulatory initiatives, the need for an intersectional methodology and harmonised efforts informed by civil society expertise extends globally. Governments and regional and international organisations across the globe are currently engaged in conversations about how to update the status quo of online content governance and tackle online harms, including online GBV and disinformation, which continue to proliferate. There is considerable momentum in this space, and the policymaking environment is potentially even ripe for a global model which facilitates cross-border cooperation. This has long been a topic of deep consideration among civil society and multistakeholder initiatives, such as the Internet & Jurisdiction Project[41], which has created resources for policymakers including a toolkit on cross-border content moderation,[42] and the recent proposal of modularity for Internet governance[43] from Susan Ness and Chris Riley at the Annenberg Public Policy Center. This type of initiative aims, to the extent possible, to create internationally aligned best practices and shared mechanisms that facilitate industry to achieve compliance with legislation across multiple jurisdictions without the need to create a supranational treaty. Otherwise, the risk of proliferation of conflicting regulatory regimes is high — with grave consequences for human rights.

Similarly, achievements made by the United Nations could be bolstered and mechanisms to monitor their development, in line with the goals of SDG 5, could be put in place. For example, the commitments of Facebook, Google, TikTok and Twitter to tackle online abuse and improve women's safety on their platforms at the UN Generation Equality Forum in Paris in 2020[44] should continue to be regularly evaluated[45]; these platforms will already be required to conduct such assessments in line with their obligations under the Digital Services Act, therefore the opportunity to align standards at a global level is evident.

Recommendations

Addressing the challenges that women politicians face requires an intersectional analysis beyond gender if we are to also address the unique challenges that some women face when they have to contend with multiple sources of oppression at the same time. This includes gendered disinformation and online GBV targeted at for example women of color politicians. Understanding how disinformation leverages false narratives based on racism and/or misogyny may also improve efforts to counter disinformation, particularly as fact-checking alone may fall short. In order to successfully tackle and eradicate online GBV and gendered disinformation,

---

[41] https://www.internetjurisdiction.net/
[42] https://www.internetjurisdiction.net/content/toolkit
[43] https://www.lawfareblog.com/modularity-international-internet-governance
[44] https://webfoundation.org/2021/07/generation-equality-commitments/
[45] https://webfoundation.org/2022/09/progress-by-social-media-platforms/

more work is needed on the part of researchers, social media and tech companies, and governments. This is particularly important for women politicians given their underrepresentation in politics. As a first step, the UN Member States, through the leadership of UN Women, should consider the following:

- Striking the balance between the protection of free expression, addressing illegal content and creating a safe online environment is a difficult endeavour. And people experiencing online GBV or being targeted by an online disinfo campaign may have their freedom of expression and freedom of participation diminished. Therefore is it vital to ensure that initiatives to combat online GBV and disinformation are proportionate and effective, to ensure they do not unintentionally infringe upon the rights of those said initiatives aim to protect.

- In some cases, bolstering the existing legal framework or introducing new laws is appropriate, whereas in most cases a co-regulatory approach which emphasises increased due diligence from online platforms or developing improved content moderation mechanisms is the best course of action.

- That said, one immediate action could be to require technology companies (including social media platforms) to have explicit policies on how they address online GBV and gendered disinformation particularly against women politicians and journalists.

- Regulators can also require technology companies (including social media platforms) to commission independent human rights impact assessments with specific assessments on incidents of online GBV and gendered disinformation and gendered disinformation including number of incidents, reports, resolution of cases, etc. broken down gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status, country, language, and other important demographic categories. Companies must then develop mitigation measures based on the results of these assessments.

- Technology companies should explore ways to make more data about their platforms available to independent researchers in a secure and privacy preserving way. This can help researchers better understand the trends and impacts of online GBV and gendered disinformation and also evaluate potential solutions. Policy makers should analyse the outcomes of the provisions now laid down in the EU Digital Services Act which requires such access, and formulates ways to develop models relevant for their contexts.

- More research is needed on the impact of gendered disinformation on women, transgender, and non-binary individual's free expression, on media plurality and on the realisation of the UN Women's key areas of focus, namely, to promote non-discriminatory laws and policies and increase women's participation in politics and the electoral processes.

- In line with the commitments established at the Generation Equality Forum 2020 and the SDG 5 goals, namely the aim to eliminate all forms of violence against all women

and girls in the public and private spheres and to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic and public life, as well as the conclusions of the authors, we recommend:

- The UN provides guidance in aligning the efforts of Member States to bolster their positive obligation to promote a safe and diverse communications environment by outlining measurable objectives in addressing disinformation from a gendered and intersectional perspective.

- For UN Women to be provided with the resources to support member states in providing awareness raising and educational training that fosters a deeper understanding of gendered disinformation, with the participation of civil society, in the aim of ensuring the safety of politically engaged women, transgender, and non-binary individuals including journalists, politicians and advocates, as essential civic space actors within thriving democracies.

- The UN to provide additional resourcing to facilitate and support the development of more research into gendered disinformation with an emphasis on determining the collective impact on women, transgender, and non-binary individuals' participation in public life.