Gendered Disinformation: Understanding and Combating a Targeted Digital Threat

Annabel Alstot*

Department of Media Communication, Yale Law School, United States

*Corresponding author:
Annabel Alstot

✉ anna@gmail.com

Department of Media Communication, Yale Law School, United States

Introduction

In today's digitally connected world, disinformation—the deliberate spread of false or misleading information—poses a significant threat to societies worldwide. A particularly insidious form of this phenomenon is gendered disinformation, where false narratives, harassment, or propaganda are specifically aimed at individuals or groups based on their gender [1]. This type of disinformation often reinforces harmful stereotypes, perpetuates inequality, and silences voices, especially those of women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and gender minorities. As digital platforms become battlegrounds for political and social influence, understanding gendered disinformation is essential for building inclusive, safe, and informed communities. This article explores the nature, mechanisms, impacts, and responses to gendered disinformation.

What Is Gendered Disinformation?

Gendered disinformation refers to false or manipulative content designed to harm, discredit, or intimidate individuals based on their gender identity or expression [2]. Unlike generic misinformation, it specifically exploits societal biases and gender norms. Common forms include:

Misogynistic or transphobic falsehoods targeting women and transgender people.

Sexualized harassment campaigns meant to silence or shame.

Fabricated stories that undermine the credibility of women leaders or activists[3].

Stereotype-reinforcing narratives that justify discrimination.

Gendered disinformation is often deployed to marginalize voices in politics, journalism, activism, and public discourse, effectively [4] restricting participation and influencing public opinion through fear or stigma.

Mechanisms and Channels

Gendered disinformation spreads through many of the same digital channels as other misinformation, but with tactics tailored to gender dynamics:

Social media platforms: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and others are frequently used to disseminate coordinated harassment and false stories targeting specific gender groups.

Deepfakes and manipulated media: Synthetic videos and images that depict women in compromising or false scenarios to damage reputations [5].

Bots and troll farms: Automated accounts amplify sexist or transphobic narratives, creating the illusion of widespread support or consensus.

Hashtag campaigns and memes: Used to mock or degrade, often under the guise of humor, making disinformation more viral and harder to challenge [6].

Anonymous messaging and forums: Spaces where gendered harassment is organized and encouraged without accountability.

Impacts of Gendered Disinformation

The consequences of gendered disinformation extend beyond misinformation itself, influencing social, political, and personal spheres:

Silencing and intimidation: Targeted individuals may withdraw from public debate, activism, or leadership roles due to fear of harassment and abuse [7].

Reinforcement of stereotypes: Persistent false narratives strengthen sexist or transphobic beliefs, normalizing discrimination.

Mental health harm: Victims often experience anxiety, depression,

and trauma related to online abuse and public defamation.

Undermining democracy: When political candidates or activists [8], especially women and minorities, are targeted, it distorts fair representation and participation.

Polarization: Gendered disinformation fuels social divides and hampers constructive dialogue on gender equality.

Combating Gendered Disinformation

Addressing gendered disinformation requires a multi-pronged approach:

Platform accountability: Social media companies must improve policies, detection algorithms [9], and reporting mechanisms to identify and remove gendered disinformation and harassment.

Digital literacy and education: Empowering users to recognize and critically assess gendered falsehoods is vital, especially among vulnerable groups.

Support systems for victims: Providing legal, psychological, and community support helps victims recover and continue their work without fear [10].

Inclusive policy making: Governments and organizations should enact laws and guidelines that specifically address gendered disinformation as a form of hate speech or cyber violence.

Amplifying marginalized voices: Promoting diverse representation in media and leadership counters disinformation by presenting accurate, varied perspectives.

Conclusion

Gendered disinformation is a dangerous and targeted form of manipulation that undermines gender equality and democratic participation. It weaponizes existing societal prejudices, creating a hostile environment that disproportionately affects women and gender minorities. Combating this threat requires concerted efforts from technology platforms, policymakers, educators, and civil society to foster safer digital spaces and empower marginalized voices. By recognizing and actively addressing gendered disinformation, we can work towards a more just, inclusive, and truthful digital landscape for all.

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