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Digital Misogyny: Social Media Based Gendered Disinformation Campaigns and Their Impact on Gender Equality

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**DIGITAL MISOGNY: SOCIAL MEDIA BASED GENDERED DISINFORMATION
CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR IMPACT ON GENDER EQUALITY**

By Major Richard Seidel

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DIGITAL MISOGNY: SOCIAL MEDIA BASED GENDERED DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND THEIR IMPACT ON GENDER EQUALITY

INTRODUCTION

The change in communicative technologies brought on by the post-digital era has significantly altered how information is shared on a global scale. New methods of information dissemination, specifically social media, have changed the speed, reach and accuracy of information sharing, and disrupted state ability to control what is being communicated.¹ The ability for virtually anyone to share information, either true or false, has led to an environment in which false or inaccurate information, otherwise known as disinformation, has the potential to undermine the foundations of the nation state.² Further, the nature of social media based disinformation makes controlling its distribution an extremely complex problem, and governments worldwide are struggling to implement appropriate control measures.³

As with several complex issues related to peace and security, disinformation impacts genders differently. Over the past decade, there have been numerous digital disinformation campaigns, both state and non-state led, that have specifically targeted women.⁴ These campaigns, known as Social Media Based Gendered Disinformation Campaigns (SMBGDC), have targeted prominent female public figures such as politicians, journalists and influencers,

¹ Bertot, John Carlo, Paul T. Jaeger, and Derek Hansen. "The impact of policies on government social media usage: Issues, challenges, and recommendations." *Government information quarterly* 29, no. 1 (2012): 30-40.

² Haciyakupoglu, Gulizar, Jennifer Yang Hui, V. S. Suguna, Dymples Leong, and Muhammad Faizal Bin Abdul Rahman. "Countering fake news: A survey of recent global initiatives." (2018).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stabile, Bonnie, Aubrey Grant, Hemant Purohit, and Kelsey Harris. "Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: Gendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics." *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (2019): 491-502.

with an overall theme of degrading the role of women in society.⁵ These attacks on women directly obstruct the level of societal participation the United Nations (UN) sees as fundamental for global security.⁶

While this paper recognizes that conflicting views exist internationally concerning the relationship between gender equality and global security, it asserts that SMBGDCs are a form of violence that impact the ability of women to participate in societal leadership positions and decision making processes, thus rendering such campaigns a legitimate impediment to the goal of gender equality. As developments are made regarding the understanding of disinformation campaigns, and how to address them within the global security environment, it is critical that governments and intergovernmental agencies increase the attention paid to associated gender aspects in order to mitigate the effects on gender equality.

OVERVIEW OF SMBGDCS

Social media disinformation campaigns, both gendered and non-gendered, are organized courses of actions that use social media platforms to disseminate false or misleading information with the intention of deceiving social media consumers. Individuals, organizations, and state actors are able to leverage social media platforms “to spread propaganda and disinformation during critical moments of public life” which can have the potential to manipulate public opinion in a significant way.⁷ While these campaigns can overtly influence critical events such electoral outcomes and vaccination campaigns, they can have a less blatant impact on items such as social

⁵ Di Meco, Lucina. “Gendered Disinformation, Fake News, and Women in Politics”. *Women and Foreign Policy Program*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gendered-disinformation-fake-news-and-women-politics>. Retrieved on: 6 Apr 2021.

⁶ Pratt, Nicola, and Sophie Richter-Devroe. "Critically examining UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (2011): 489-503.

⁷ Bradshaw, Samantha, and Philip N. Howard. "The global organization of social media disinformation campaigns." *Journal of International Affairs* 71, no. 1.5 (2018): 23-32.

division and gender equality. What differentiates SMBGDC's from other disinformation campaigns is that they harness misogyny, sexism and gender stereotypes to accomplish their aim. As SMBGDCs are a relatively new concept, it is important to avoid a narrow definition that could constrict the development of a comprehensive understanding; for the purpose of this paper, such campaigns can be defined as social media based activities that include gendered false information aimed at negatively impacting women and women's rights.

Globally, illiberal actors and authoritarian leaders are using digital gendered disinformation to push activists aside, promote misogyny and gender stereotypes, and "push back against the progress made on women's rights".⁸ While the magnitude and scope of these campaigns varies greatly, there are numerous instances of sizeable campaigns that have been going on for years. These campaigns have had wide reaching implications on women and gender equality, and have degraded the ability of women to actively participate in society. While SMBGDCs are associated with a broad range of targets, the three primary categories of influential positions most notably impacted are female politicians, journalists and activists. These positions are targeted as they are very closely tied to the progression of women's rights and the power that women hold within society.

FEMALE POLITICIANS

The most significant and farthest reaching impact of SMBGDCs is their ability to impact the involvement of women in politics, and the overall success of female participants in the political arena. "Women in politics in particular are the targets of overwhelming volumes of online attacks, fake stories, humiliating or sexually charged images, including photomontages,

⁸ Di Meco, Lucina, and Wilfore, Kristina. "Gendered Disinformation is a National Security Problem. *Tech Stream: Tomorrow's tech policy conversations today*. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/gendered-disinformation-is-a-national-security-problem/>. Retrieved on: 11 May 2021.

often aimed at framing them as untrustworthy, unintelligent, emotional, or sexual.”⁹ Over the past twenty years there have been numerous examples of gendered disinformation campaigns that have driven women to abandon political careers, and dissuaded others from seeking them.¹⁰ For instance, Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk’s powerful speech to the United Nations in 2017 about the impact of her country’s conflict with Russia on women was met with a sexualized disinformation campaign that aimed at discrediting her message, as well as diminishing her as a person. It included a screenshot of a fake tweet indicating she would run naked through the streets of Kiev if Russian-backed separatists were victorious in a critical battle, and doctored photos that depicted what appeared to be her naked and in numerous provocative poses.¹¹ A broader example of social media based abuse and harassment against female politicians can be found in India, the country with one of the highest prevalence rates of SMBGDCs.¹² Research conducted during the general elections of 2019 indicated that female politicians received a cumulative 1 million problematic or abusive tweets throughout the election period.¹³ These tweets included both death and rape threats, and the sources of several of them could be related to persons connected with India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, an individual long accused of

⁹ Di Meco, Lucina. “Online Threats to Women’s Political Participation and The Need For a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them”. *Women and Foreign Policy Program*. Retrieved from: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/gendered-disinformation-fake-news-and-women-politics>. Retrieved on: 6 Apr 2021. Pg 4.

¹⁰ Stabile, Bonnie, Aubrey Grant, Hemant Purohit, and Kelsey Harris. "Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: Gendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics." *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (2019): 491-502.

¹¹ Jankowicz, Nina. “How Disinformation Became a New Threat to Women”. *World Policy*.(2017). Retrieved from: <http://worldpolicy.org/2017/12/20/how-disinformation-became-a-new-threat-to-women>. Retrieved on 7 May 2021.

¹² Mackintosh, Eliza, and Gupta, Swati. “Troll armies, 'deepfake' porn videos and violent threats. How Twitter became so toxic for India's women politicians”. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/01/22/india/india-women-politicians-trolling-amnesty-asequals-intl/index.html>. Retrieved on: 7 May 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

“running a troll army, targeting political opponents, especially prominent female figures”.¹⁴

Lastly, it is important to point out that digital gendered disinformation campaigns are not a problem that North America is immune to. In 2016, presidential nominee Hilary Clinton was victim of numerous social media campaigns that contained a gender nexus. These included well-coordinated Russian state-run attacks, as well as numerous sexist tweets from her opponent Donald Trump.¹⁵ In the presidential election of 2020, vice president Kamala Harris faced similar campaigns, including the “#heelsupharris” online campaign which indicated she had “slept her way to the top” and was not fit to be Vice President.¹⁶

JOURNALISTS

Another prominent group of influential professionals that are impacted by SMBGDCs are female journalists. Because they play such a distinguished role in the public sphere, female journalists regularly face campaigns aimed against silencing them and removing them from the public eye.¹⁷ Prominent and widespread examples of this abuse are the social media based attacks against female Pakistani journalists. Not long after the introduction of social media platforms, female Pakistani journalists began to be subjected to vicious and coordinated online

¹⁴ Di Meco, Lucina. “Gendered Disinformation, Fake News, and Women in Politics”. *Sixty-fifth session of the Commission on the Status of Women*. Retrieved from: https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/65/egm/di%20meco_online%20threats_ep8_egmcs65.pdf?la=en&vs=1511. Retrieved on: 6 May 2021.

¹⁵ Conroy, Meredith. “Strength, stamina, and sexism in the 2016 presidential race.” *Politics & Gender* 14, no. 1 (2018): 116.

¹⁶ Tarte, Nora. “With a female vice president in office, has media gender-bias left the presidential campaign trail? The short answer is no, and the reason why is deep rooted.” (2021).

¹⁷ Chen, Gina Masullo, Paromita Pain, Victoria Y. Chen, Madlin Mekelburg, Nina Springer, and Franziska Troger. “‘You really have to have a thick skin’: A cross-cultural perspective on how online harassment influences female journalists.” *Journalism* 21, no. 7 (2020): 877-895.

campaigns aimed at harassing, intimidating and discrediting them.¹⁸ Recent campaigns, which have been linked to the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf political party, the national military, and right-wing societal elements, have consistently applied sexualized and gender-specific harassments and threats.¹⁹ These have encompassed threats of death and rape, defamation indicating journalists were “prostitutes” or “whores”, and have even extended past digital boundaries and included kidnappings and murder.²⁰ While the discussed Pakistani example is on the more extreme end of the scale, SMBGDCs of a similar nature are occurring globally.²¹

ACTIVISTS AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS DEFENDERS

While the online global community has proven to be very powerful in promoting gender equality and rallying against sexual abuse and oppressive governments, online platforms have also been used to launch campaigns against gender equality activists. “Death threats, threats of sexual and gender-based violence, and online defamation and disinformation campaigns – often of a sexualized nature, and often including the victim’s real-life addresses – are used to torment and terrorize women who speak out”.²² For instance, a United Nations Human Rights Council Rapporteur received multiple threats of violence as well as a graphic video of a human

¹⁸ Jamil, Sadia. "Suffering in silence: The resilience of Pakistan’s female journalists to combat sexual harassment, threats and discrimination." *Journalism Practice* 14, no. 2 (2020): 150-170.

¹⁹ Gul, Ayaz. In Rare Testimony, Female Pakistani Journalists Describe Social Media Attacks to Lawmakers. *VOA News*. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/rare-testimony-female-pakistani-journalists-describe-social-media-attacks-lawmakers>. Retrieved on: 12 May 2021.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ferrier, Michelle, and Nisha Garud-Patkar. "TrollBusters: Fighting online harassment of women journalists." In *Mediating Misogyny*, pp. 311-332. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2018.

²² Al Hussein, Zeid Ra’ad. The Impact of Online Violence on Women Human Rights Defenders and Women’s Organizations. *United Nations Human Rights Council*. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23238&LangID=E>. Retrieved on: 5 May 2021.

decapitation, and reproductive rights activists in Mexico faced a significant online campaign consisting of harassment, false sexualized narratives and threats against themselves and their families.²³ Further, activist Gurmehar Kaur, a native of India, was subjected to a substantial social media disinformation campaign following her speaking out against the 2017 violence that occurred at Delhi University's Ramjas College. The catalyst of the campaign was a video that went viral falsely showing Kaur drinking alcohol and dancing provocatively in a vehicle, and its intent was to discredit, embarrass, and silence her.²⁴ The aforementioned examples are only two examples of SMBGDCs that have targeted activists, however the prevalence of similar occurrences is extensive.

IMPACT OF SMBGDCS ON GENDER EQUALITY

Evaluating the influence of SMBGDCs on gender equality through the lens of the United Nations "gender equality targets" makes it is clear that such campaigns are very impactful to the pursuit of equality for two primary reasons.²⁵ First, the attack on women through the digital distribution of gendered disinformation is a form of violence that must be eliminated as demanded by target 5.2, "end all violence against and exploitation of women and girls". Social media based violence or harassment can be just as psychologically impactful as physical attacks and is negatively affecting the health of women around the globe.²⁶ Women who are victims of

²³ Al Hussein, Zeid Ra'ad. The Impact of Online Violence on Women Human Rights Defenders and Women's Organizations. *United Nations Human Rights Council*. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=23238&LangID=E>. Retrieved on: 5 May 2021.

²⁴ Gupta, Sonal. Women are Targeted With Fake News More than Men – Why?. *The Quint*. Retrieved From: <https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/explained-why-fake-news-misinformation-around-women-more-than-men>. Retrieved on 13 May 2021.

²⁵ United Nations. "5 Gender Equality". *The Global Goals for Sustainable Development*. (N.D.) Retrieved from: <https://www.globalgoals.org/5-gender-equality>. Retrieved on 14 May 2021.

²⁶ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/research/2018/03/online-violence-against-women-chapter-6/>

“abuse or harassment on social media platforms reported stress, anxiety, panic attacks, powerlessness and a loss of confidence as a result”.²⁷ These negative health consequences degrade the ability of women to fully participate in society which ultimately endorses gender inequality.²⁸ Further, the speed and scope of digital violence campaigns touch such large segments of society that the callous behavior begins to take on a sort of social acceptability. Second, SMBGDCs directly and forcefully impede the “full participation in leadership and decision making” that United Nations gender equality target 5.5 calls for.²⁹ From politicians being targeted through state backed campaigns, to activists being embattled by the collective action of citizens, SMBGDCs are corrupting the ability of women to fully and effectively participate in leadership opportunities in all levels of political, economic and public life. The mass exodus of women from the United Kingdom Parliament in 2019 is one prominent example of many in which the voice and power of women was degraded through online gendered campaigns.³⁰ In order to draw women towards pivotal leadership and decision making positions and set pre-conditions for success, it is imperative that SMBGDCs confronted forcefully and put to an end.

SMBGDCS IN THE PRESENT DAY

The most concerning and unfortunate part of SMBGDCs is the lack of action being taken to confront them. While governments and intergovernmental organizations have been quick to

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ United Nations. “5 Gender Equality”. *The Global Goals for Sustainable Development*. (N.D.) Retrieved from: <https://www.globalgoals.org/5-gender-equality>. Retrieved on 14 May 2021.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Britton, Bianca. “There were never more women in UK Parliament. Now there’s an exodus”. CNN. Retrieved from: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/31/uk/female-mps-standing-down-uk-election-intl-gbr/index.html> Retrieved on: 18 May 2021

recognize social media disinformation as a powerful phenomenon with the potential to shape the future of global power and democracy, they have been less reactive to confronting the gender aspects of such campaigns; “little attention has been paid to the way in which misogyny intersects with misinformation and violent extremism in the on-line world”.³¹

While the complexities surrounding social media disinformation make it understandable that governments, intergovernmental organizations and tech companies are still focused on developing macro-level understandings of how social media based disinformation campaigns impact the global society and how to manage them, the attention being paid to sexism and gender specific misconduct seems unacceptably slow. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have displayed a strong resolve to address issues such as racism and violent extremism, yet the same efforts do not seem to be being applied to online sexism and misogyny. For instance, in 2012, British tourists Emily Bunting and Leigh Van Bryan were arrested in Los Angeles Airport on terror charges after posting to Twitter that they were going to “destroy America”.³² While the two tourists had used the word “destroy” as British slang for partying, there was a mechanism in place to report the verbiage to the Department of Homeland Security and the two were arrested. Comparatively, the SMBGDC “#HeelsUpHarris” continues to run seemingly unimpeded on Twitter. As of May 18 2021, a Twitter search of #HeelsUpHarris provided tens of thousands tweets that supported the narrative that Kamala Harris slept her way to vice presidency. The “top tweet”, included sexualized memes and inaccurate information that

³¹ Stabile, Bonnie, Aubrey Grant, Hemant Purohit, and Kelsey Harris. "Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: *women or femal....use oneGendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics." *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (2019): 491-502.

³² Harawa, Daniel S. "Social media thoughtcrimes." *Pace L. Rev.* 35 (2014): 366.

were inappropriate, embarrassing and anything but supportive of gender equality.³³ How is it possible that there is a mechanism in place to stop two twenty-something year olds associated with a suspicious tweet from entering the United States, yet Twitter, an American company, continues to enable a gendered disinformation campaign involving the American Vice President?

LOOKING FORWARD

The impact of SMBGDCs on the goal of gender equality is obvious and significant, however addressing this relatively new and complex phenomena is much less clear. What is clear is that the world is at a point in time where specific attention must be paid to SMBGDCs and their impact on the global society. While women's rights progressed significantly during the 20th century, and momentum in this area continued to increase into the 21st century, the introduction of online gendered disinformation campaigns threatens to significantly regress the advancements made. Failure to adequately address SMBGDCs risks compounding preexisting gender biases, impeding global gender equality efforts and increasing the oppression of women in our global society.³⁴ The United Nation's Landmark Resolution on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR1325) makes clear that peace and security efforts, as well as sustainable global development, are more effective when women are equal partners in the decision making process, and it is time that governments and intergovernmental institutions contemplate this when choosing how to confront social media based disinformation campaigns.³⁵

³³ I abhor Joe Biden & HeelsupHarris. Twitter Post. May 18, 2021. <https://twitter.com/coachcubs/status/1394714907115937800>

³⁴ Stabile, Bonnie, Aubrey Grant, Hemant Purohit, and Kelsey Harris. "Sex, Lies, and Stereotypes: Gendered Implications of Fake News for Women in Politics." *Public Integrity* 21, no. 5 (2019): 491-502.

³⁵ Pratt, Nicola, and Sophie Richter-Devroe. "Critically examining UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13, no. 4 (2011): 489-503.

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