

ACT Alliance's Input for the report on gendered disinformation

Submitted to the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Opinion

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Introduction

ACT Alliance – Action by Churches Together is a coalition of more than 145 churches and church-related organisations working with long-term development, advocacy and humanitarian assistance in over 125 countries. ACT Alliance is committed to gender justice and identity as common values and inalienable human rights, and seeks to counter the backlashes against women's rights, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

What do you consider to be 'gendered disinformation'?

'Gender disinformation' is intentionally designed to undermine, discredit and target individuals and groups based on their gender. Women and girls in all their diversity are particularly targeted. This includes, but is not limited to, the dissemination of gendered stereotypes, harmful narratives, or fabricated content that perpetuates gender-based discrimination, inequality, or violence.

Often 'gendered disinformation' has the goal of discouraging and silencing people who are seeking gender justice. It is important to recognise 'gendered disinformation' as gender-based violence. False and misleading information is spread with the intention to silence the voices of women and girls in all their diversity, and deter their participation in public and political life, including leadership positions. For example, cyber stalking, threatening to release a girl or a woman personal information in public or social media after a failed relationship or marriage, but also posting messages that incites violence against women.

While social media has become a strong tool for movement building for gender and social justice, for example, the #MeToo Movement and #BlackLivesMatter, it has also recently been used as a tool for gendered disinformation aimed at shaming and discrediting women. At the global level, Greta Thunberg faced an online attack which she used to challenge negative masculinities. However, many women, girls and LGBTQI+ people, in the face of such violence, leads to self-censorship. The National Democratic Institute, through the 'Tweets that Chill' report, highlights that gendered disinformation and gender-based violence online, has grave impacts on women across diverse countries, including Kenya, Colombia and Indonesia. The report shows how such stereotypes and attacks continually prevent women from effectively participating in electable political leadership. Recently, in Uganda, there has been a trending

hashtag 'fear women', following increased paternity DNA testing after a famous businessman in Uganda found out that 6 out of his 11 known children were not his biological children. A similar hashtag trended in Nigeria in 2020 for the same reasons. At the same time, many women in these countries, who are living in assumed monogamous relationships have borne the pains of receiving their husband's children arising from infidelity and expected to accept these children and look after them with no complaint. For both countries, and many others across the world, which are highly patriarchal, gendered disinformation has been used by both state and non-state actors to reinforce gender stereotypes, and generalisations that target women negatively and ultimately affect their freedom of speech and expression. The hashtag 'fear women' is one example of how gendered disinformation is used to further reinforce patriarchal norms and affect the dignity of women.

Gendered disinformation arises due to various factors, including the patriarchal systems, structures and stereotypes, which are embedded in digital technologies. One example of this is evident in the design of digital voice assistants like Amazon's Alexa and Apple's Siri, where most of these voice assistants are female and express a personality that is engineered to be uniformly subservient. This perpetuates and reinforces gender stereotypes and biases in the digital realm.

Furthermore, there is a concerning presence of non-visible bias unintentionally built into most technological systems. Developers often fail to involve women in the development, design, testing, and rollout of new innovations. By starting with a standard user in mind, these developers set in motion patterns of discrimination that are hidden under the assumption of system neutrality. By addressing these underlying issues and taking proactive steps to address biases in technology, we can work towards reducing gendered disinformation and promoting a more equitable and inclusive landscape.

How is 'gendered disinformation' similar to or different from online gender-based violence?

While gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence both involve harmful actions and behaviors targeted at individuals or groups based on their gender, they differ in nature. Gendered disinformation focuses on the spread of false or misleading information, whereas online gender-based violence encompasses a range of abusive behaviors such as harassment, threats, doxing, revenge porn, and other forms of digital violence.

Gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence are both a violation of human rights, which result in harming the dignity of a person. Gendered disinformation often targets high profile women, for example, women in public leadership, journalists, and women activists. The LGBTQI+ community are also targeted by gendered disinformation and online gender-based violence. Online gender-based violence includes cyber harassment, doctored images of women, promoting gender stereotyping messages that promote, for example, violence against women on social media platforms.

What measures have States, digital companies or international organizations taken to combat 'gendered disinformation'?

The international community including governments and private sector have come together to start looking at the global policy frameworks. For the first time, the 67th UN Commission on the Status of Women session focused on innovations and put in place a process to fast track the digital compact as one step towards establishing international law and policy that address among many issues gendered disinformation. However, at many national levels, policy is not moving as fast as the digital transformations leaving policy processes to only do 'catch-up' with the developments and thus limited access to justice for those affected by gendered disinformation. In Uganda, the gender cyber laws include Data protection and privacy Act 2029, Computer misuse Act 2011, Electronic Transaction Act 2011, Electronic signature Act 2011.

The EU passed its Digital Services Act in 2022 which sought to address disinformation and incorporate human rights protections in the regulation of online platforms. The actual implementation of these measures is still wanting especially regarding dissemination and awareness creation among the users on the existence of these laws.

To what extent do these responses comply with international human rights law standards, in particular freedom of expression?

Some countries unfortunately have used the legislations to curtail freedom of speech and expression and the ambiguity/vagueness in the laws leave room for abuse. Governments in Angola, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Swaziland and Zambia introduced laws that were intended to regulate hate speech and disinformation with many of them referencing that the laws will prevent the spread of 'fake news', however, rather than regulating hate speech and disinformation, many of these have been used to settle political scores and silence critics. In Nigeria a social media law was enacted in the aftermath of the #EndSARS campaign against police brutality.

What recommendations do you think the Special Rapporteur should make and to whom on combating gendered disinformation?

1. Invest in strengthening research, including local actors, at country and regional levels on gender disinformation to better understand the contexts, root causes and prevalence. Research also the nexus between ICT, gender, and human rights, to promote women's peace and security in digital spheres, including strengthening systems and practices to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in all their diversity.
2. Address violence against women and girls in digital space. Protect and support those that are targeted online, for example, women human rights defenders, including faith leaders speaking out for gender justice.
3. Adopt and enforce laws that prevent and protect women and girls in all their diversity from all forms of online violence and safeguard the online privacy of women and girls in all their diversity.

4. Work with faith actors as strategic partners to address gender inequalities and harmful social norms that restrict women and girls from equally participating in the digital sphere.
5. Ensure that ethical frameworks for corporations involved in digital technologies are in line with international human rights law obligations, including principles of equality and non-discrimination.
6. Develop capacity enhancement for service providers, media houses, civil society, and policy makers to effectively address gendered, including addressing gaps in effective policy making and implementation.
7. Develop education and awareness creation through various channels including social media radio/ production of Information Education Communication (IEC) materials on gender information.
8. Engage in community driven approaches and work with local structures, including faith-based organisations, to create awareness on challenging structural bias, gender norms and stereotypes. This can include, for example, partnering with faith leaders, men and boys, traditional leaders, and wider civil society, including feminist and community-based organisations.
9. Ensure the enactment of digital laws, which are gender transformative and address the gendered forms of misinformation and online sexual and gender-based violence.
10. Ensure the integration of inclusive and gender-responsive approaches in the design, use and development of digital technologies, considering intersectional factors of exclusion.

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