



Maat for Peace' Submission on "Freedom of Expression and the gender dimensions of disinformation"

Introduction:

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right that lies at the heart of democratic societies; it enables individuals to express their opinions and share information freely. However, freedom of expression is currently being challenged by the proliferation of misleading or false information targeting individuals, especially women or girls, on the basis of their gender, with the aim of exploiting or spreading gender stereotypes, promoting discriminatory attitudes, or manipulating public opinion on issues related to gender. Over the recent years, it has become increasingly clear that disinformation does not affect all individuals equally, and that false or misleading information disproportionately targets girls and women, thus highlighting gender dimensions of disinformation, especially in the digital age characterized by streamflow information.

In fact, gender disinformation is a critical and complex problem that is causing growing concerns in many countries worldwide, where misinformation targeting girls and women affects their ability to freely exercise their right to express themselves and undermines their ability to participate in public discourse or action. Such misinformation continuously exposes women and girls to risks of falling victims to online sexual and gender-based violence, perpetuates gender stereotypes and societal prejudices against women and girls, undermines progress towards gender equality, poses risks to the well-being and autonomy of girls and women, and deepens discriminatory attitudes against them.

Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights presents this statement on freedom of expression and gender dimensions of disinformation by focusing on the key issues attached to the call. Maat recognizes the gravity of this issue especially in light of the exacerbation of information targeting girls and women in many countries worldwide, in a manner that negatively impacts women and girls ability to



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express their opinions freely. The following is the response of the institution to the main questions attached to the invitation:

A. Conceptual Issues:

○ What is 'Gendered Disinformation'?

Maat believes that the term gender disinformation refers to misleading or false information that specifically targets women or girls, or exploits gender stereotypes. Gender disinformation, or the manipulation of public opinion on issues related to gender, can take many forms, including political manipulation which appears in disinformation campaigns that specifically target women seeking to run for political office with the aim of influencing their political behavior or undermining their representation in decision-making processes. Political manipulation may involve spreading false information about a candidate's qualifications or promoting fake immoral narratives about her, in a way that undermines public confidence in the candidate and blocks all chances of electoral success.

○ How is 'Gendered Disinformation' similar to or different from online gender-based violence?

Maat believes that gendered misinformation is very similar to online gender-based violence, in that they are both forms of online violence against women and girls. However, there are some major differences that differentiate them, which can be explained as follows:

- **Scope:** Online gender-based violence differs from gender-based disinformation in that online gender-based violence is a broader term than gender-based disinformation; online gender-based violence includes any form of violence perpetrated against women and girls Online, which includes a wide range of harmful behaviors perpetrated against women online, including gendered misrepresentation, harassment, threats, and other explicit abuse.

On the other hand, gender disinformation is limited to misleading or false information that specifically targets women and girls with the aim of establishing



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gender stereotypes, or manipulating public opinion on issues related to gender. Sexual misinformation takes several forms, including disinformation campaigns aimed at spreading misleading information about women running for political office, spreading false information about women's health and reproductive rights, or using disinformation to silence the voices of women human rights defenders.

- **Objective:** online gender-based violence is different from gender-based disinformation in terms of their respective objectives. Gender-based disinformation usually aims to manipulate public opinion, influence political behavior, or undermine efforts for gender equality. In contrast, online gender-based violence aims to intimidate or demean women because of their gender, often out of misogyny or sexism.
- **Reporting:** online gender-based violence is different from gender-based disinformation in terms of the possibility of identification and reporting. Online gender-based violence is easily identifiable, tracked and reported, as it involves explicit forms of violence, harassment, threats and abuse against women and girls.

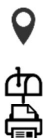
B. Responses of States, Companies and Organizations:

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

Maat monitored various measures taken by some countries, digital companies and international organizations with the aim of combating "gender misinformation". For example, the Arab Republic of Egypt issued Law No. 175 of 2018 on Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes, which criminalized a wide range of online activities such as gender misinformation, including activities related to publishing false or misleading information that would harm a person's reputation, promoting acts of harassment, threats or sexual extortion online. Article No. 26 of the Law imposed a prison sentence of no less than two years and a fine of no less than EGP 100,000 for anyone who intentionally spreads misleading information that would



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harm a person's reputation and honor.¹ In addition, Egypt has worked with digital companies to develop policies and practices to combat gender-based misinformation and guarantee women's protection. For example, Facebook Company has partnered with the National Council for Women to ensure women's protection on the Facebook platform, and to develop a training program on how to identify and address gendered misinformation.² In addition, a number of other countries, in collaboration with international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector, have developed in 2022 a global partnership roadmap to prevent, address and respond to online harassment and gender-based abuse.³

Not only states but also digital companies including Facebook, Twitter, and Google have developed a number of tools aimed at combating gender misinformation, identifying and removing harmful content, including sexist, racist, or discriminatory content. They have also developed educational resources to help users understand gender misinformation and how to protect themselves from it, and launched several joint programs with governments and civil society organizations that aim to raise awareness of and combat sexual misinformation. In addition, a number of international organizations have recently taken a number of measures aimed at addressing online gender misinformation. For example, UNESCO launched a global dialogue on January 25, 2023, bringing together experts from the public and private sectors and civil society from around the world, with the aim of promoting an effective global response to online gendered misinformation.⁴

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

¹ Law No. 175 of 2018 Regarding Anti-Cyber and Information Technology Crimes, link: <https://bit.ly/3i2vwgz>

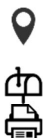
² A partnership between the National Council for Women and Facebook Company to guarantee women's protection, the State Information Service, December 17, 2020, link: <https://bit.ly/3O1JWBS>

³ 2022 Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, US Department of State, MARCH 16, 2022, link: <https://bit.ly/3PDq6cG>

⁴ Global dialogue: online gendered disinformation, UNESCO, 20 April 2023, link: <https://bit.ly/3PK6vYu>



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Maat believes that the responses of states, international organizations, and digital companies to gender-based disinformation can comply with the standards of international human rights law, particularly freedom of expression, if these responses are proportionate and necessary to combat gender-based disinformation and without restricting legitimate freedom of expression that is guaranteed under international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. For example, laws and legislative measures adopted by states to combat gender disinformation can be compatible with international human rights law standards, in particular freedom of expression, if such laws are specific, proportionate and necessary to achieve legitimate goals such as preventing hate speech targeting women or addressing gender-based violence and without such laws unduly restricting or criminalizing legitimate expression, dissent, or public debate relating to women and girls.

C. Finding Solutions:

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

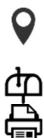
Maat recommends the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression to consider the following recommendations and needs to be submitted to all stakeholders with regard to combating gender misinformation and limiting its impact on freedom of expression. The following are the most prominent:

Recommendations to States:

- **Strengthening legal frameworks:** Governments should put in place comprehensive legislation targeting gender disinformation, ensuring that it is consistent with international human rights law, including freedom of expression standards. Such legislation should be proportionate, narrowly designed, and aim to address the root causes of gender misinformation without restricting legitimate freedom of expression or having an appalling effect on the freedom of expression guaranteed under international human rights instruments.



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- **Educating users:** Governments should educate their citizens about the dangers of gender disinformation, and how to protect themselves from it.
- **Working with partners:** Governments should work with partners, including civil society organizations and independent media, to combat gender disinformation.

Recommendations to Digital Companies:

- **Developing tools and policies:** Digital companies should develop tools and policies to combat gendered disinformation, and ensure that harmful and gendered content is removed.
- **Collaboration with stakeholders:** Digital companies should engage in ongoing collaboration with governments, civil society, and academia to develop best practices and policies that effectively combat gender misinformation.
- **Promoting transparency:** Digital companies should be transparent about their efforts to combat gender disinformation, by publishing periodic reports on progress made in combating gender disinformation, and providing accessible mechanisms for users to report and appeal to content-removing decisions, while preventing abuses and arbitrary enforcement.

Recommendations to International Organizations:

- **Fostering international cooperation:** International organizations should promote international cooperation to combat gender disinformation, provide technical assistance to governments and digital companies, and help develop global standards to combat gender disinformation.
- **Raising awareness:** International organizations should raise awareness of the issue of gender misinformation by publishing reports and studies, organizing conferences and workshops, which highlight the impact of gender misinformation on freedom of expression, and making recommendations to governments and digital companies.



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- **Supporting Research:** International organizations should support scientific research efforts on gender disinformation and its impact on freedom of expression and gender equality, fund research projects, and provide data and resources to researchers.



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